

Let the Light In:

*An Introduction to Writing Poetry
in Inclusive Settings*



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“The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee,” by N. Scott Momaday (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997)

“Things I Didn’t Know I Loved,” by Nazim Hikmet. Trans. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk Blasing (New York: Persea Books, 1975)

“Knoxville, Tennessee,” by Nikki Giovanni. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994

The Book of Questions, by Pablo Neruda. Trans. William O’ Daly. Fort Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001

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FOREWORD

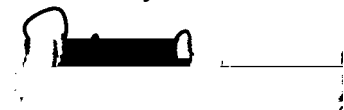
Whether it's a nursery rhyme from childhood, a moving song lyric, or a few lines of classic verse, poetry strikes a chord for many of us. With *Let the Light In: An Introduction to Writing Poetry in Inclusive Settings*, VSA arts introduces the art of poetry writing to students of all abilities.

Poetry is a perfect classroom tool for both students with and without disabilities. It allows students freedom to explore and experiment with writing and empowers them to express their thoughts and feelings in new ways. It also helps to develop reading skills. Poetry writing is a flexible medium that can take many shapes and students of all abilities can feel confident creating in a non-competitive atmosphere.

The lessons in *Light the Light In* are appropriate for all ages. They feature suggestions to ensure that students, including students with disabilities, have opportunities to express themselves and their creativity.

Please look for our other resource books in this series: *Opening Up the Sky: An Introduction to Creative Writing in Inclusive Settings* and *Real Stuff That Matters: An Introduction to Journal Writing in Inclusive Settings*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "Soula Antoniou". The signature is written over a horizontal line that extends to the right.

Soula Antoniou
President
VSA arts

Don't rush the process. Start with oral work and feel the pleasure of hearing the spoken word. Tape the poems. Move your body as if it were a poem. Sing the poem. Honor the sound of the words.

Lesson Structure

The first two lessons include techniques for revision. This same process can be followed with other lessons. There are links to art, music, and academic subjects, and suggestions for excellent ways to tie the poetry process to language studies and other classroom learning.

The **One Step Further or Back** sections have suggestions for expanding the lesson so that more time can be taken, or more attention given to certain aspects of the lesson. This allows teachers to consider the individual needs of the group and choose a focus and pace that will work best. In **Extensions**, there are suggestions for a variety of ways that the poetry or the writing process can be enlarged and can link to other activities or classroom subjects. In both cases, these suggestions are not prescriptive, but simply offer examples. The possibilities are endless and much of the joy of teaching these lessons will be to see where they lead the teacher and students.

The **Including All Learners** sections suggest adaptive approaches that illustrate a few of the many ways to make the experience accessible and satisfying for students with disabilities. You will find practical information necessary for providing appropriate adaptations for specific disabilities. Remember that much of successful inclusion depends on the creative problem solving of the teacher or workshop leader, and the participants.

You will find in the lessons three kinds of key points that are highlighted within boxes. **Links to Learning** highlights ways that the lesson's writing activities and extensions can tie into and enrich the core curriculum. **Let's Say That Again** emphasizes educational approaches that are vital to the success of the activity. **Lesson Learned** points to the insights gained into students' experiences, thought processes, and learning styles which can come from the writing experience.

Mimi White has worked as poet in residence in a variety of locales since 1982. She has taught in public schools, settings for individuals with disabilities, residential facilities for seniors and for people with mental health disabilities, and community sites including churches, temples, daycare, and hospice care facilities.

Deb Stuart is a teaching artist whose discipline is children's traditional music and folklore. She has worked with students across the United States, in Central and South America, and in Europe as a residency artist and teacher trainer. Her training has focused on the integration of music into the classroom with particular emphasis on meeting the needs of all learners through arts-based approaches. Stuart has been a roster artist for the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts for 24 years.

TIME OUT FOR POETRY

Poetry Does Not Come Out of Thin Air

Poetry does not come out
Of thin air. It comes
From your heart
So you cannot be
Empty-hearted.
Let the light in.
If you don't
It will turn into
A burden and you
Will feel so empty.

Greg, middle school
Farmington, New Hampshire

LESSON ONE: SEVEN-WORD SPILL

To write a poem, begin with the words. Words are the basic building block of a poem. First words, then lines, then stanzas. Poets play around with word choice until the poem is printed or shared or simply called “done.” (Adapted from *The Practice of Poetry*, edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twitchell)

GOALS

To explore the meanings and connotations of different words; to let the subject of the poem arise from the juxtaposition of the words; to demonstrate the connection between words and images

HOW TO BEGIN

Two Wild Peacocks

Two wild peacocks
were running in the
forest writing poems
with their wings.

Samantha, grade 2
Rye, New Hampshire

INSTRUCTIONS

To choose your words, look in poems. Look for short words or long words, words that sound interesting, words that can have several meanings. If you end up with one that just doesn't work, use it as an example of a word that is too big or noisy for a poem. Some lists I have used are: whisper, wind, owl, garden, river, voice, autumn, green, light, crooked, burden, everything, empty, branches. "Poetry Does Not Come Out of Thin Air" (page 7) was triggered by this last list.

Write your poem, which you have created from the students' words on the board. Talk about how the words happened to fall into place (and they will!). Then write their list on the board. Give them the following instructions. This is an open-ended exercise and these rules provide boundaries and structure.

Tell your students:

Try to use all the words (try is the operative word).

Use the words in any order you wish.

You may repeat words.

You may change the endings of words: "silence" to "silent," "talking" to "talk."

You may add any other words you may need.

Do not think about writing a poem. It can look like a paragraph.

Read the poem out loud to yourself. Title the poem when you are done.

When you finish writing, draw a pencil sketch below the poem,
to show what you were imagining.
Write quickly. Do not think too much.
It is fine if not all the words are used. You are after something
that is interesting.
It does not have to rhyme.
Have fun!

Here is one more example. Notice how the comparison in the third
and fourth lines enlarges the poem. You can offer this as another
example either before or after the children have written their poems.

The Wind

The wind is howling, scaring
the owls looking for food.
The river is as quiet as



they are closely related. Then write “connotation” on the board, the fancy word for suggested meaning. Poems revolve around these hidden meanings. Then ask, “**Did I only give you seven words?**” and they will shout, “No!” They see that the poem is small, but that each word stands for more than just its literal meaning.

You can also slow the lesson down by taking more time with each step. First focus on the poem that you wrote on the board. Then, in another session, have students work on their poems.

Let students participate in choosing lists of words. They could also literally cut their poems into individual words and rearrange the words to form diTJesson 1 TcneTJ-13.31502 TD0.0007 Tw()Tj0 -1.TjTT4 1 Tf12.860545 T

order. If necessary, the words could be picture coded. The student could ask for other word cards that could be manipulated and added to his or her poem.

LESSON TWO: BORROWED LINES

This lesson is a good follow up to “Seven-Word Spill.” It works well with students ages 10–15, fifth grade through high school, and best with the older students. A line triggers the poem instead of a cluster of words.

GOALS

To allow the line to lead to the subject; to explore the line as the basic unit of thought in a poem; to work with longer lines

HOW TO BEGIN

Prepare a list of lines borrowed from poems you like (a list is provided at the end of this lesson). To develop your own list, use an anthology or visit a library or bookstore and browse. Note the poet who wrote the poem and the title of the poem for follow-up work. Distribute the list of lines. Ask the students to mark the lines they like as you read the list, slowly, out loud.

INSTRUCTIONS

After reading the list twice (or asking if a student would like to read the list), hand out paper and give these instructions:

Choose your favorite line and borrow it as your first line.

You may change or delete any words in the line.

You may repeat the line or vary the line.

You may introduce another line from the list after you have written at least five lines of your own, trying to choose a line that moves the poem forward.

Do not worry if the poem does not make complete sense; you can revise it later.

Title your poem at the beginning or at the end and you may borrow a line for the title.

If you get stuck, repeat the line or try another line.

Be playful, be brave, and do not worry whether or not it is a poem.

Before they start, demonstrate the process for the students. Ask someone for a first line. Then, create a poem spontaneously, on your feet, saying/reciting.

Another technique is to say a line out loud and ask the students to add the next line. One line leads to another. You can let the students call out a response spontaneously or you can choose a structure, such as pointing to a raised hand—whatever will work best for your particular class.

That's where no lives
under my feet (the student line)

I am told, but I do not believe
that I was shy as a child

REVISION

Writing poetry is like building with blocks. You add a block to make your building higher. Sometimes you take away a block to create a more pleasing shape. Experiment with your poems by pulling out a line or moving lines around. Maybe the first line belongs in the middle section. Maybe two lines say the same thing and one can be deleted.

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For students with cognitive or learning disabilities, the list of instructions will need to be presented in ways that are easily understood and remembered. A simplified list that says, “**OK to change or repeat, OK to use more than one line, OK to not make sense—Have fun!**” could be posted in large letters on the board.

An example of the power of writing (The line: *Then, no, now*):

No, Not Parents

Then, no, now
now, no, then
why, why, why
arguing with parents
you're never gonna win.

Clean this, wash that
did this, done that;
not enough,
wow this is tough;
parents just don't get enough.

Respect, respect,
stand up straight,
look me in the eye,
be a man don't cry.

Why oh why
did I get these folks;
I think I'm gonna die.

Hey, A-, what is this
we're sick of giving kindness
go to your room, you're not good enough
do better in school
and life won't be so tough.

Justin, middle school
Farmington, New Hampshire

LESSON THREE: NATIVE PEOPLES' VOICES

I Am

I am the
rainbow
 spreading
 color after
 the rain.

Flora, grade 2
Somersworth, New Hampshire

Poetry was first an oral expression, a necessary utterance of awe or praise. Traditional sources in many cultures reflect this. To honor this oral tradition, one can turn to Native American songs. Native American people spoke, chanted, danced, and sang their songs. The human voice conveys the meaning and spirit of the poem.

GOALS

To hear native peoples' poetry and practice its oral tradition; to expand a simple line of poetry into a textured, complex one

HOW TO BEGIN

Read "The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee." This poem from the Kiowa Nation is written and translated here by N. Scott Momaday in *The Man Made of Words*.

The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee

I am the feather on the bright sky
I am the blue horse that runs in the plain
I am the fish that rolls, shining, in the water
I am the shadow that follows a child
I am the evening light, the luster of meadows
I am an eagle playing with the wind
I am a cluster of bright beads
I am the farthest star
I am the cold of the dawn
I am the roaring of the rain
I am the glitter on the crust of the snow
I am the long track of the moon in a lake
I am a flame of four colors
I am a deer standing away in the dusk
I am a field of sumac and the pomme blanche
I am an angle of geese in the winter sky
I am the hunger of a young wolf
I am the whole dream of these things

You see, I am alive, I am alive
I stand in good relation to the earth
I stand in good relation to the gods
I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful
I stand in good relation to the daughter of Tsen-tainte
You see, I am alive, I am alive.

To prepare the students for the poem, speak briefly about the oral tradition, how this poem was first danced and chanted. Tell students that it was translated from the Kiowa language into English by N. Scott Momaday. Talk about the word “delighted” so students understand the joyous tone of the poem. Ask the students to shut their eyes if they listen best that way. Tell the students that you will ask two questions when you finish reading: **“What did you see in your imagination?”** and **“What did you hear that you liked?”**

SPEAKING A POEM

After you and the students share your thoughts, ask them, “**How did most lines begin?**” (with “I am”) and

difference between the lines “I am the night sky” and “Look at the night sky”? Who wants to write some lines? They all do. Again, demonstrate briefly, asking them to add uncommon adjectives, vivid verbs, and detailed clauses.

ONE STEP FURTHER OR BACK

Spending a few days or a week on the oral part of this lesson encourages the creative use of language without concerns for penmanship or spelling. This also allows the quiet voices to be heard and provides a chance for students to practice listening. Play the game for a day or two, then record a favorite line from each student. Students may want to illustrate their lines. A book could be made of the lines and pictures and placed in a quiet listening area, a reading corner, or the library.

E



Here is another child's poem:

I am the invisible air blowing through the willow trees making a wishing sound.

I am a colorful rainbow in the sky and I am full of happiness.

I am the burning sun, yellow and bright, shining down on children.

I am the cold, white sparkling snow falling on the mountainsides in winter.

I am a gray dolphin leaping in the sparkling blue water.

I am the beautiful green grass that sprouts in springtime.

I am the white puffy clouds that turn gray because it's angry when it is about to rain.

Alexis, grade 2

Hampton, New Hampshire

LESSON FOUR: HELLO MOON

Spring Comes

Bird, chirp for joy, chirp, chirp, chirp for me.
Chirp my old friend, remember me?
Chirp my friend, now remember me?

Chirp, chirp, now I do.
Hi, my old friend, I remember you.

Jenna, grade 3
Portsmouth, New Hampshire

INSTRUCTIONS

List these on the board. They are presented as guidelines, not as rules. Students often find their own way into a poem.

Think of something in nature or in the world around us, which you would like to talk to.

Address it: Hello sky; Dear wind.

Tell it something: You are big and high.

Try to use a simile: You are quiet as the grass; Your wings feel like silk.

Ask it a question that is specific and reflects a particular quality. "How are you?" is too general, but you might ask a worm, "How do you see in the dark?"

You may repeat any words or lines.

Try to sing what you have written.

ONE STEP FURTHER OR BACK

Take a trip outdoors before starting this lesson. Ask the students to notice objects that are close to them (the sidewalk, the grass) and things far away (the sky, treetops, tall buildings). Have them ask a question right out loud to the objects, whispering to the nearby objects and speaking loudly to the ones in the distance or up high. The students can take turns doing this. When you come back inside, bring small objects if possible or draw pictures of objects too large or



Shine Sun

Shine sun shine
on my door.

Shine sun shine
on the crops all over the world.

Shine sun shine
on the people all over the world.

Shine sun shine
on all the animals all over the world.

Shine sun shine
on the earth.

Shine sun shine
on the beautiful flowers.

Shine sun shine
on me.

Thomas, grade 3
Portsmouth, New Hampshire

INSTRUCTIONS

Tell your students:

Use crayons, not markers (watercolor is lovely, but takes more time).

Blend your colors.

Fill up the whole sky.

Work quickly.

Do not draw what is below your sky (we'll imagine that later).

Pretend you are looking at the sky.

Title your picture at the top or on the back when you have finished.

Sunrises in Fall, Summer, and Spring

Sunrises, sunrises all in different seasons. First of all is spring with apple buds. Second of all let's look at summer. All green, green, green. Third is fall, but not the last. I like fall the best because of its golden sunrises and red apples.

Zach, elementary school
Southwest Harbor, Maine

INCLUDING ALL LEARNERS

If there are students with learning or cognitive disabilities in the group, giving them a chance to hear and see the book chosen in advance of the whole class reading may make the lesson more accessible for them. For students who are nonverbal, prepare ways for them to answer questions and show what they are seeing in the book's pictures—color charts, picture cards, textured materials.

Students with motor disabilities may need to do their artwork on larger pieces of paper. Remember to offer this option to all students if it is needed for some.

If there are students who need more time to reflect on the questions, provide a chance for them to work with an aide or volunteer so that they are able to think and respond at their own pace.

LESSON SIX: MAPPING YOUR WORLD

(Adapted from Georgia Heard's *Awakening the Heart*)

The Trampoline

Madly jumping on a trampoline
Bouncing alone with a companion in my head
Leaping around with my friends
Watching the clouds pass over the sky
Then watching the sunset
As I lie down on the cool mesh net
I get back up, then bounce some more,
Sitting down to catch my breath
Wind whistling through the treetops
Laughter from my friends whipping through my brain like sugar
The springs launching me into the darkening sky
As I bounce in the upcoming night
The sun is long gone, the moon rules the sky
I forget my fears and angers
As happy thoughts surround me

Jonathan, middle school
Northwood, New Hampshire

Students often have a refuge, a place where they can be alone. The younger the student, the more imagined or fanciful the space. Starting in middle school, students seem to need a place to sort out their feelings and ideas.

GOALS

To imagine or reimagine a place in the world where the student feels “at home”; to use as many of our senses as possible in exploring this space; to practice some of the skills learned in the Seven-Word Spill

HOW TO BEGIN

Begin by asking the students several questions. These will help them focus on their places and imagine them more fully. The questions are not asked to be answered, but rather to stimulate the imagination: “Where do you go when you want to be alone? Is it in the mountains, the sea, or an open field? Is it in a small alley or the corner of a park? Is there a river? What time of day is it—dusk, dawn, noon? What is the weather like? Where are you? Are you sitting on a rock or a bench? Are you lying in the sun or curled up beside a warm brick wall?” Some students choose their bedrooms or their cars. One student chose a closed hockey rink. The key is to choose a place that feels like “home.”

THE MAP

Pass out lined or unlined 8 1/2” x 11” paper. Ask the students to fold the paper in half the long way—or, as one eight-year-old said, “the hot dog way.” Then fold the paper in thirds, as if it were going into a business-sized envelope, a third down from the top, a third up from the bottom. Open the paper up and you have six rectangles. Draw the six boxes on the board and as you go through the directions, mark each box with what you have asked them to do.

INSTRUCTIONS

In one section draw a sketch of this place, put in as much detail, using only your pencil or pen. **“What is in the sky? What is the weather like? What time of day is it? If you are in a room, do you see anything out the window?”**

In another section write short phrases describing your place. Talk briefly about the difference between a phrase and a sentence. A sentence would be, “The wind is blowing the trees,” but the phrase would be “wind in trees.” Encourage the use of interesting adjectives and the filling up of the space.

In another section write about sounds. **“What sound do you hear? Rustling of leaves, crack of thunder? It may be completely quiet. Write a phrase about the silence.”**

mapping can be done in another lesson or even over two lessons if this seems best. Poems could be composed orally while looking at the squares. The writing of poems, which comes from the maps, can be a stand-alone activity.

All the other techniques from previous lessons work well here. Sessions for revising, illustrating, and audio recording make good follow-up activities.

EXTENSIONS

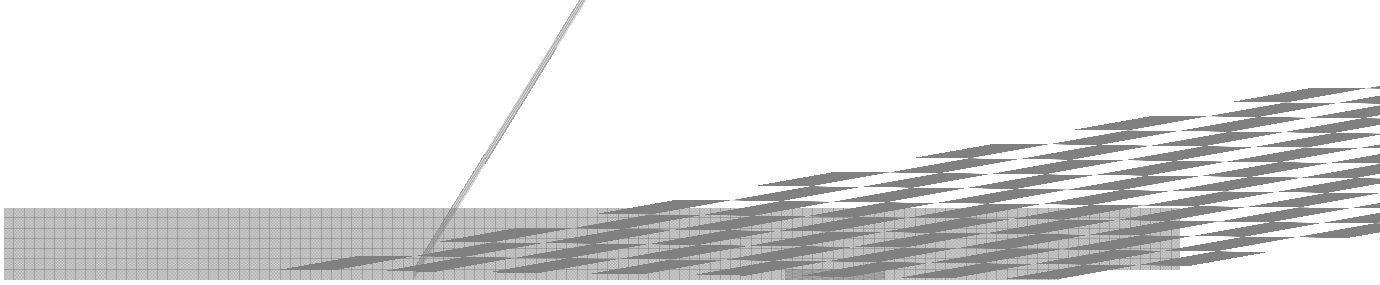
The maps can be refined and worked on so that they can be exhibited, along with the poems that they inspire. A photo exhibition of special places, either from actual snapshots or magazines with high quality photography, could be put up around the room.

The following poem was designed during a classroom collaboration with weaver Sarah Haskell. The weavings and poems were exhibited and sold at a local Chamber of Commerce as a fund-raiser for a community organization.

The Rain Forest

I stand in the tree top with my hand acting as a visor to my eyes. I look far in the distance and see miles of wet rain forest. To me there is no better place than the huge tree top. If I look down or if I look up, all I see is green. What could be better? Every day I see something blossom, either a bird or a flower or a cloud. It's so loud yet so peaceful, because all the noises I hear I enjoy: a bird song or the rain pouring down on the trees and the ground like elephants stomping. Even after it stops raining, I can hear it because the trees that are miles up are still dripping.

Jake, middle school
York, Maine



LESSON SEVEN: STONE POEMS

Dear Rock

You are lines like Dracula teeth.
You are like puzzle pieces
of a map of America.
You are the inside of a volcano.
I hear the steam
hissing like a snake.
I see the lava bubbling.

Are you really a fossil
from inside the earth?

Connor, grade 2
Hampton, New Hampshire

This lesson is designed around looking at stones or other objects in new ways to see what poems might be hidden inside them. Look around you. What poems may be waiting inside your landscape? Seashells, small pieces of brick or concrete, pine cones, twigs, tall grass, colorful bits of paper, or maybe even trash, all have potential. When a student holds an object and observes it closely, the poem that follows is concrete, the language often more vivid.

GOALS

To explore metaphors; to see stones (and other objects) in a new way; to see the transforming power of poetry; to explore the connection between reality and the imagination

HOW TO BEGIN

Collect enough objects for all students, choosing things that surprise and please you. Bring them to class in a bag or box. Before or after showing the objects to the students, you might read a few poems

written about what you have brought in to share. Take the objects out of the bag one at a time, slowly passing them and asking the students to observe the shapes, colors, lines, patterns, cracks, indentations, textures. You might ask, “**What does this shape remind you of?**” or “**What does this look like?**” You are beginning to ask them to think in terms of metaphors.

INSTRUCTIONS

After each student chooses a rock or object from the ones that you have brought in and has had time to get to know it, pass out lined paper and give the following instructions:

Fold the paper in half the long way, open it up, then write above the left side, “Real,” and above the right side, “Imagined.”

Look at your rock again and write down an observation under the “Real” column, such as gray or long crooked line, or smooth—be an observer, be a scientist.

Across from this observed detail, in the “Imagined” column, write something else you imagine that line might be or what the color gray reminds you of—for example, gray could be rain clouds or a foggy sky or the wind off the river.

Write as many things as you would like for the imagined images. Go back to the real side and note another observation, maybe something about the texture or the shape, then write down imagined images for that observation—try to list in short phrases.

Make several observations; take your time; try using a magnifying lens to see as much as you can; hold your rock and shut your eyes; make an observation about its weight and texture.

WRITING THE POEM

When the object has been explored thoroughly, ask the students to look at their “Imagined” word lists. See if there are a few words that

cluster together and might begin a poem. Look for words that stick out and do not belong and eliminate these words. Circle the phrases that sound interesting. Words from the “Real” side and other new words that help to create a poem may be included. A simple poem, written in the form of questions, plus a more complex poem, are included in this lesson to show how the list can evolve into poetry. Sometimes one image triggers a whole poem. That is fine and that is what happened in the poem below.

My Pearly White Moon Pebble Rock

Fairies, elves, gnomes and dwarves
dancing in the light
of the pebble moon.
All the other people
were invited, too.
This pebble moon
is where they have their parties.
It is smooth



of the lesson will be helpful. Allow students who do not write easily to use the two sides of their paper to draw the real and the imagined.

Set up simple exercises, which allow comparisons to be chosen by nonverbal students—pictures of objects to be paired with color cards, various nature pictures, or textured materials.

Students who have visual disabilities will explore the objects with their hands. Offer all students the opportunity to “see” their objects in this way. Talk about how much more we learn when we do not just look, but feel, taste, sniff, put our cheek on it, or listen to see if it makes a secret sound.

If there are students with hearing disabilities in the class, explore the vibrations of the object when tapped or knocked against another surface. All students will enjoy doing this. Using drums, as suggested in the Extensions section, would be effective with both hearing students and students with hearing disabilities.

LESSON EIGHT: “I NEVER KNEW I LOVED”

If there were ever a poetic trap it would be writing love poems. They are fraught with a potential for cliché and sentimentality. Turning to poetry is often the first place to look when designing a lesson. This lesson is based on a poem by the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet. He was a political prisoner for many years and when he was released he wrote a beautiful poem, “Things I Didn’t Know I Loved.” He wrote it on the train going home, the urgency of the poem being the relentless listing or litany, an outpouring of things he had missed while in captivity. This lesson borrows his refrain, creating a lesson about things we loved, but might have forgotten, had never written down, or never said out loud. Here are some excerpts from his poem:

“I didn’t know I liked rain
Whether it falls like a fine net
I didn’t know I liked
Whether it falls like a fine net

language. Then shift gears and ask the students to pretend. Talk quietly. Ask them to listen to you, but not to answer out loud.

I Never Knew I Loved

I never knew I loved
the smooth gray fur of my cat snuggling with me.
I never knew I loved
the sound of the rain drip drop on my bedroom window.
I never knew I loved
the sound of the wind going shssssssss outside at night.
I never knew I loved
to think about how much fun my sister is going to have at
her dance.
I never knew I loved
to smell the fresh air when my mom puts the window up
on a hot summer night.

Hillary, grade 2
Hampton, New Hampshire

ONE STEP FURTHER OR BACK

More time can be spent on the oral portion of this lesson. Before writing a poem, the students could simply list things that they love.

These may be read and recorded. Students can take turns reading one another's poems. This makes a good oral activity at the opening or closing of the day.

EXTENSIONS

Sometimes, it is fun to draw a huge heart and write all the lines within the heart, cut the heart out, write more on the back, and hang them as mobiles in the room.

These poems make lovely Valentine's Day or other occasion cards as family members often appear in the poems.

As with the “I Am” poems, these make fine picture books, each student contributing a line and picture. The illustrations could be in collage form using materials with a lot of texture and tactile interest.

This lesson reinforces science units that teach the five senses.

INCLUDING ALL LEARNERS

This is an excellent lesson for students with learning disabilities or cognitive limitations. Choices for things they love can easily be made from pictures and objects. Tactile materials—fabric, liquids, wood, stone—will prompt responses and get students started on associated ideas.

For students with behavioral or emotional disabilities, structures about appropriate responses may need to be reinforced. Be sensitive to students who have had traumatic experiences and are insecure about themselves and their lives. Provide safe and structured guidelines: **“Think about favorite games we play with our class”** or **“Think about any animals you have seen that were special to you.”** These kinds of sentences will get students started with nonthreatening associations, and then they can branch out from there.



LESSON NINE: OF TIME AND PLACE

Knoxville, Tennessee

I always like summer
best
you can eat fresh corn
from daddy's garden
and okra
and greens
and cabbages
and lots of
barbecue
and buttermilk
and homemade ice-cream
at the church picnic
and listen to
gospel music
outside
at the church
homecoming
and go to the mountains with
your grandmother
and go barefooted
and be warm
all the time
not only when you go to bed
and sleep

This poem by Nikki Giovanni (from *Celebrate America in Art and Poetry*) is the perfect poem to read on a warm spring day when everyone is anxious to be outside enjoying the weather. The poem is full of the details of summers when Giovanni was a child in Tennessee. The poem's strength is its velocity; she uses no punctuation! Have your students try to imitate this style in their own poems about times, places, and seasons that have given so much happiness.

GOALS

To write a long, skinny poem; to use as many ands as one likes so that the poem keeps moving; to use specific language; to write about something that brings great happiness

HOW TO BEGIN

Read the poem out loud a couple of times, the first time slowly, the second time as fast as you can, trying to say it all in one breath. This emphasizes the velocity of the poem and highlights its strength: the urgency to tell what is most loved and enjoyed. Read the poem a third time and ask the students to count the number of times they hear “and.” Pass around copies of the poem. Point out how the poem has no punctuation, very short lines, and keeps moving. Nikki Giovanni knows how to use punctuation, but has chosen to write a long fast poem that is not slowed down by periods or commas. Ask the students why she might have written her poem this way. Then look at the specific language. What does she love best about summer? What words do you remember after the poem is read? Talk briefly about the things the students love about spring or fall or visiting their grandparents. Keep asking for specific details that bring that experience to life.

INSTRUCTIONS

Hand out lined paper. Ask the students to fold the paper in half the long way; this ensures that the poem will be long and skinny. Have them write their poem down one side and up the other, if need be. They may write a second poem on the other side. Get them started by saying, **“Write as if you are speaking quickly, pretending the poem is spoken in one breath. Use the word ‘and’ as much as you like and write about something that gives you great happiness.”**

As in the lessons “Of Time and Place” and “I Never Knew I Loved,” give attention to students with emotional issues. Helping them feel comfortable with positive choices may take some individual time and preparation before they join this activity with the entire class.

Spring

I like spring best because I get to
wear
my sandals
and I
don't get
fur stuck
in my
toes and
sometimes
I get
to play
in my
crazy dazy
and I
get wet
I like
going to
the beach
and when
it's low tide
I get
to go
looking for
shrimp and
crabs and
sometimes
I find
fish but
I am
always late
when
I get
my bucket

Victoria, grade 2
Hampton, New Hampshire

Now go out and enjoy the day!

One final student poem. What exercise from the book might you teach, using this wonderful poem as an example? Or, come up with a new lesson that could use this poem as an example.

The Dark Footsteps

When my mom walks in
the mud she leaves dark footsteps.

The wind sounds like dark
footsteps.

When people are walking
down the road they have
dark footsteps.

In my dreams there are
dark footsteps.

When the squirrels walk
up the trees they have
dark footsteps.

When my old dog walk
in the yard he leaves
dark footsteps.

Whitney, grade 3
Portsmouth, New Hampshire

ADDENDUM

LINKING POETRY TO VISUAL ART

In many of the previous lessons, a drawing or painting component is offered either as a core activity or as an extension or adaptive technique. When linked to visual art, a poem becomes less a fixed object and more a thing made of words and feelings. Playing with these words and feelings is key in the experience of writing poetry, and visual art opens the students up to this quickly and easily.

Fabric art, in particular, is very freeing, perhaps because it is not representational, but rather a playful use of color and found materials. Here are two examples of more in-depth art links to two fabric art forms: weaving and quilt making. This is a sharing of ways in which I linked poetry writing to fabric art in collaborative efforts working with fiber artists. They are included in this addendum as a classroom teacher could well tap community or parent involvement, or share a personal arts interest or skill, and develop lessons that use visual arts as inspiration or an adjunct activity.

CLEAR LINES, COMMON THREADS

Another visual art that relates to poetry is weaving. In one collaborative weaving-poetry session in a high school class, students took yarn, fabric, ribbons, twigs, feathers, and simple cardboard and wove beautiful creations. Together, weaving and poetry offered students two different ways of thinking, of imagining their worlds—the visual and the literary.

Some students used their weaving as an inspiration for their poems. After Dorothy wove her sunflowers, this is what she wrote:

The Blind Angel

The girl is blind.
She can't see me,
my true feelings,
the way I really am.
I have to act differently
in front of other people.
I just say stuff,
like I'm cool
and just do things,
but I don't mean it.
The blind angel
doesn't see me
the way I am,
but she can see me
the way I feel.

Kim, high school
Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Even for high school students, consider asking them about their weaving and writing down what they say as they speak. This same technique can be used with young students and others who cannot write for themselves. Dictation allows the true voice of the poet to shine. The earlier lessons on line breaks can be taught in the revision process to shape the poem, if the student wishes. Start by asking, **“What is the title for this work?”**

BY HAND

In addition to weaving, quilts can also inspire poetry. Start by looking closely at a quilt, each student studying the detail, then viewing from further back, to take in the fuller design. After the students have had an opportunity to examine the quilt, ask for phrases: **“What they might hear if they entered the scene in the quilt, what might the air feel like, what weather might be coming, does the quilt evoke any feelings, what is far off?”** Write the phrases on the board and,

together, write a poem, keeping the phrases short, or making sentences, rearranging the lines until you like how the poem sounds.

Evening Arrives

It is a peaceful, quiet night
A tree cradles a lonely bird nest.
Snow falls in the dark sky.
Tall trees grasp the stars.
Crowded, green, pointed needles
Poke the sparkling snow.
Mountains roll with the sound
Of a mournful howl.

Collaborative, grade 5
Rye, New Hampshire

This collaborative poem is full of imagery adopted or imagined from a quilt. To encourage students to go beyond the visual and to introduce ideas alongside the images, turn to Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions* for inspiration and guidance. The book, printed in Spanish with an English translation, is a series of poems written in the form of questions. Questions make us think in new ways, and his in particular inspire yet more questions, rather than answers.

XLVII

Oyes en medio del otoño
detonaciones amarillas?

In the middle of autumn
do you hear yellow explosions?

Por qué razón o sinrazón
llora la lluvia su alegría?

By what reasons or injustice
does the rain weep its joy?

Qué pájaros dictan el orden
de la bandada cuando vuela?

Which birds lead the way
when the flock takes flight?

De qué suspende el picaflor
su simetría deslumbrante?

From what does the hummingbird
hang its dazzling symmetry?

Read some to the students; they will likely be in awe of the simple words that raised questions they could not answer that would not leave their minds. Here is an example from the book. All the poems are written in couplets, two-lined stanzas. Just for fun, try this form when you and your students write your poems.

Here is what Whitney, also in the fifth grade, wrote:

The Expression

Do you see the sad expression
on this lonely tree?

Can you hear a song of sorrow
that a tree has sung?

And do you hear the sound
of blowing leaves playing together?

Do you see the purple and
blue flowers in the sky?

Whitney, grade 5
Rye, New Hampshire

Perhaps we were all collaborating with Neruda. Collaboration brings energy to the writing process. It allows another part of the mind to enter into the creation of a poem, and above all, it is a lot of fun.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Recommended children's books

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Dundrea, Olivier. *The Painter Who Loved Chickens*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. (An artist decides to paint what he loves.)

Jarrell, Randall. *The Bat-Poet*. Illustrated by Maurice Sendak. New

Reference books and anthologies

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Drake, Barbara. *Writing Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1983, 1994. (Text that explains poetry in easy to follow format.)

Heard, Georgia. *Awakening the Heart*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999. (Text that inspired "Mapping Your World.")

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Kovacs, Edna. *Writing Across Cultures: A Handbook on Writing Poetry and Lyrical Prose*. Hillsboro, OR: Blue Heron Publishing, Inc., 1994. (This book presents writing traditions from around the world, from ghazal to haiku.)

Momaday, N. Scott. *The Man Made of Words*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. (Collection includes essays, stories, and poems.)

Neruda, Pablo. *The Book of Questions*. Trans. William O'Daly. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001. (Bilingual edition in Spanish and English.)

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *What Have You Lost?* Photos by Michael Nye. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1991. (Simple question sparks fine elegies; best for upper grades.)

Web Sites

<http://mgfx.com/kidlit/kids/artlit/poetry/index.htm>
KidLit Poetry Gallery

<http://www.poets.org/>
The Academy of American Poets

http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/index.html
Teacher programs and resources at the Getty

<http://www.poetrysociety.org/>
The Poetry Society of America

<http://www.twc.org/>
Teachers & Writers Collaborative

<http://www.favoritepoem.org/>
Robert Pinsky, the Favorite Poem Project

<http://www.riverofwords.org/>
Robert Hass

