

Image to Word

An Abecedarian List of Games and Experiments

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LAST YEAR, I was asked to be part of a pedagogy panel on teaching students to write poetry in response to visual art at the Association of [Writers and Writing Programs \(AWP\)](#) writing conference. For years I have been asking students to respond to images, so it was useful for me to have an excuse to think about my own methodology. I came to realize that the use of images in my writing and teaching practice is part of a larger approach that employs “chance” as a way to spur creativity. My goal is to create the experience of surprise for my students, and for myself, so that we can be pushed into the parts of ourselves that are the most strange and irreducible. As Hans (Jean) Arp wrote, “The law of chance, which embraces all other laws and is as unfathomable to us as the depths from which all life arises, can only be comprehended by complete surrender to the Unconscious.” In other words, the surprise of the unknown forces us to access part of our imagination that would otherwise remain dormant. To pick an image to write about “at random” forces one to be open to the possibilities of the world, to say “yes” not only to the image at hand, but also to all the conflicting

voices stirring within.

So, in the spirit of [Bernadette Mayer’s “List of Experiments”](#) and as a response to the AWP invitation, I created my own list of favorite image-based writing activities. I have structured my piece as an abecedarian, a list from A to Z, because I wanted the form of my writing to mirror the idea of chance and random constraint.

These ideas were developed in the private workshops I teach for “advanced” writers at my apartment in Brooklyn, as well as in my classes at Rutgers and Sarah Lawrence Writer’s Village, and in workshops I have given for teenagers and younger students at public schools and libraries. Most of these ideas are mine, but a few are variations on old Teachers & Writers favorites. Many of the ideas can be adapted for different ages. Usually I try to do the exercises along with my students and share my work with them at the end.

Abstract Metaphor

AI start by telling everyone to write three abstract or emotion words on index cards. (One per index card.) For example, “mystery” or “hate.” The students put them face down and hold on to them. Then I give each student a separate image to look at. I set the timer for ninety seconds and ask everyone to write as many descriptions of the image as possible. At the end of the time, the students pass the image left and repeat the

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procedure twice.

Next, I show the students examples of poems that start with metaphors that connect abstract concepts to concrete descriptions. For example, [Eileen Myles' poem "Perfect Night"](#) begins, "Youth / itself / is a little / baby animal / we're petting / his honey fur / as night cars pass / in Missoula." [Victor Hernández Cruz's poem "Energy"](#) starts with, "Energy is red beans and rice," and [Natalie Diaz's "Why I Hate Raisins"](#) begins, "Love is a pound of sticky raisins / packed tight in black and white / government boxes the day we had no groceries."

I ask the students to pass their list of abstract words to the right. Now each student should have the descriptions they wrote, and three abstract words from the student next to him or her. I ask them to connect their descriptions of the images to the abstract words as the poets did in the lines I just shared with them; in other words, start a sentence that begins with the abstract word, then the word "is," then a sentence from the description. This should give everyone three slightly odd metaphors. Pick one, I tell them, and use it for a first line, then free-write for five or six minutes. Sometimes they want to use more than one. My approach is always to tell my students to go for it.

B *Black and White*

I ask my students to look at black-and-white "art" photographs, either at a museum or in reproductions I've provided, and tell them to describe the colors they don't literally see. I remind them to make the descriptions active, using verbs. For example, if they see the hat as red, they might ask, "What is the red hat doing?" I talk about how some poets are able to use synesthesia and see sound and movement as possessing a color, and give them a translation of Kurt Schwitters' poem "Anna Bloome" as an example: ["Blue is the color of your yellow hair. / Red is the cooing of your green bird."](#) I talk about how color words can express an emotion as well as a visual reality, and ask them not to think too much about it. I want to allow them to play with the possibilities the images suggest.

C *Color Study*

My students pick a color, and then walk around a museum or look through an art book and write down images with that color. Usually I'll have them make a list of twenty images, focusing on nouns and verbs, not adjectives. After they finish taking notes, I ask them to use the images in a poem, and tell them that they may not even want to "name" their color in their final poem. Sometimes before they write their poems, we read a few model poems out loud to get us in the mood, maybe Rilke's ["Blue Hydrangea"](#) or Hans (Jean) Arp's "White."

D *Dreams*

My students make a list of three anxiety dreams, and then we read the Polish poet [Wisława Szymborska's poem "Two Monkeys by Brueghel,"](#) where she connects her speaker's dream to the Dutch master's painting.

After reading the poem, the students look at an image chosen at random from a stack. I ask them to write a poem starting with one or two lines about their dreams and then something about the picture. The images can be connected or not. There's no need even to tell the reader that one is writing about a dream.

E *Exquisite Corpse*

I share images of exquisite corpse drawings (by André Breton, Yves Tanguy, and others) and then have the students play the ["Exquisite Corpse drawing game,"](#) where one person draws the head, another person draws the torso, and a third person draws the legs, without looking at one another's work. Then we read [Bob Kauffman's poem "Will You Wear My Eyes,"](#) which makes colorful, extended metaphors for different parts of the body, and includes the lines:

My face is covered with maps of dead nations;

My hair is lettered with frying ragweed.
 Bitter raisins drip haphazardly from my nostrils
 While schools of glowing minnows swim from my
 mouth.

Next, the students exchange drawings, so they are looking at one they did not contribute to. I ask them to “pretend you are the person in the drawing and write a poem describing the different parts of your body using detailed, extended metaphors.”

F *Fable-esque*

We read a few prose poems in translation from [Max Jacob's *The Dice Cup*](#), and I ask my students to notice how the poems often start with a general statement and then later move to a specific detail. For example, “Kaleidoscope” begins, “Everything seemed to be in mosaic. The animals were walking with their paws toward the sky, except for the donkey that is, whose belly was covered with written words that changed constantly.” I then give my students postcards of surreal paintings or drawings, perhaps by [Max Ernst](#) or [Leonora Carrington](#). I ask them to look at the image and write a prose poem that imitates the Jacob-esque movement from broad to specific. Next, I ask them to write about what they can't see in the image, but can imagine happening in the future.

G *Going Inside*

I give students an image of the Dada drawing [*Dadameter* by Johannes Theodor Baargeld](#). To me, it looks like a head with ideas in it. I ask the students to take out a blank piece of paper and draw a giant outline of a head, a big oval. I put on [Sarah Vaughan's song “Doodling”](#) and have them doodle to it. We then read a poem about “going inside.” (For more “going inside” exercises, see [Jack Collom & Sheryl Noethe's *Poetry Everywhere*](#) [Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2005].) For younger kids, I might use [Charles Simic's “Stone.”](#) In his poem, Simic describes the inside of the stone as being a sort of internal landscape, so I ask them to imagine the inside of their mind as a

place with objects and sounds within it.

For teenagers and adults, I use [C.D. Wright's poem “Utopia.”](#) The second stanza begins:

Inside of me
 there is a period of mud,
 flies and midges come with the mud
 followed by a time of intense sun;
 with the sun comes a cool room
 furnished by a rotating fan, a typing machine.

I ask the students to use Wright's poem as a starting point and to look at the Baargeld drawing for ideas. We then write a poem as a class that starts with the line “Inside of me.” Whenever they get stuck, I ask them to look back at the drawing and describe what they see. I also ask them to imagine what it would sound like, smell like, and feel like in that space. I try to get them to add verbs to their impressions, so that their images are more active. After they write the group poem, I ask them to return to their own pictures and describe what they see, hear, smell, and feel inside of their own “minds.”

H *Haiku*

Most traditional *haiku* are about capturing a single moment in time and focusing on the impermanence of life. In a painting, time is already frozen, so writing a haiku about a painting can be redundant. I ask my students to imagine that the paintings they are looking at are *not* already “set,” to imagine that the objects in them are alive. In a 5-7-5 syllable scheme, I ask them to capture the feeling of time stopping just for a moment, and to think about the Japanese concepts of *wabi* (the beauty in simplicity) and *sabi* (the beauty of old things, the beauty of imperfection).

I *Imperative*

We read [William Carlos Williams' poem “Peasant Wedding”](#) (from *Pictures from Brueghel*), which begins,

Pour the wine bridegroom

where before you the
bride is enthroned her hair

loose at her temples a head
of ripe wheat is on
the wall beside her the

guests seated at long tables
the bagpipers are ready.

I point out how Williams moves from command to description. We then look at paintings, photographs or reproductions, and I ask my students to try this move out, to move from the imperative to the descriptive in the same sentence the way Williams does.

J *Jumble*

Each student receives five index cards and five images. I tell the class to look at one of the images and write a description of something in the work. We repeat this four times. Then I shuffle the cards with the descriptions and redistribute them to the students. I ask the students to write a poem that combines as much of the language on the five cards as possible, adding additional language at will.

K *Kinesthetic Sculpture*

Sometimes I take my summer students to the Storm King Sculpture Garden in Upstate New York or to view the sculptures at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. When we look at the pieces, I ask them to imagine that the sculpture before them is alive, and to describe in their poems, or notes, how it would move through space. I ask, “If it were alive, where would it go? How could it travel? What would the movement sound and smell like? How can you create a language that mimics the feel of the sculpture’s movement?”

L *Life Stories*

I share some poems that tell an entire life story, beginning with birth or the time before birth. Perhaps [Yehuda Amichì's poem “Autobiography,”](#) which begins,

My father built over me a worry big as a shipyard
and I left it once, before I was finished
and he remained there with his big, empty worry
and my mother was like a tree on the shore

And/or [Gloria Fuertes' poem of the same name:](#)

At the foot of the cathedral of Burgos
my mother was born.

At the foot of the cathedral of Madrid
my father was born.

Or [Brecht's “Of Poor BB”:](#)

I, Bertolt Brecht, come from the black forests.
My mother carried me into the cities
When I was in her belly. And the chill of the forests
Will be in me till my dying day.

I then have my students look at a painting of a person. A slightly abstract or surreal image would work best for this—maybe early Picasso or Chagall, or even something more recent, like [Ida Appenberg](#) or [Julie Heffernan](#). I have them pretend to be the person in the picture and write a poem about his or her life story.

M *Multi-colored Stanzas*

We read [Bernadette Mayer's poem “A Very Strong February,”](#) which contains a color word in every line. We then walk around a painting gallery or look at an art book with images of paintings in it. I ask the students to write a line that connects the image to a random color that I call out, and I set a timer for one minute. The point of the timer is actually to slow down the process, so they really look and think about each line. I tell them that if there's nothing literal in the painting that fits the color to think about Mayer's line, “At some point later gorgeous red adventure stops,” and write a line about something that has the feeling of the color. We then repeat the exercise, using a different image and a different random color. This continues for anywhere from seven to twenty lines.

N *Night Vision*

We look at a painting with a detailed scene that takes place during the day. I then ask the students to describe what happens at that place at night.

O *Opposites*

I say, “Write the opposite of everything you see in a painting.” For example, if the painting contains a blue mountain, you might write a line about the activities of a yellow puddle. In a follow-up activity, have the students exchange these poems and write the opposites of one another’s poems. At the end, it’s fun to compare “the opposites of the opposites” to the original images.

P *Personification*

I ask my students to write poems where an abstract idea or emotion word is personified. For a model poem, I sometimes use [Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks,”](#) which begins “In the moonlight / I met Berserk,” or Hans (Jean) Arp’s poem “My Happy Feet,” where “death rides incognito on a bicycle.” I ask my students to think of an abstract idea or emotion they would like to meet, and have them write it down. Then I have them look at a painting and imagine that their abstract idea is a person or animal in the space of the painting. Some questions for the student poets to consider: *What is the abstraction doing? Wearing? Riding? Where does she go? What does she tell you? Who was she in a previous life?*

Q *Questions*

This is an exercise I especially like to do at galleries. I ask everyone to look at a piece of art and write ten off-the-wall questions about it—something like “Who lives in the smoke?” or “What did the rooster dream about last night?” Then we move away from the art and everyone is handed someone else’s questions to answer.

R *Rorschach Test*

We stand in front of an abstract painting and look at it. I ask the students to make a list of objects, animals, and people they see in the abstraction. Then, moving away from the image, we write poems about how these various elements meet and interact.

S *Sound Game*

I start by talking about how certain consonants sound louder than others. For example, the letters P and D sound louder than S. We write some quiet and loud sentences on the board. Then I pass some images around with a sheet of paper attached to each. On each sheet, students write a “loud”-sounding sentence inspired by the image on one side and a “quiet”-sounding sentence inspired by the same image on the other side. After each piece of paper has around twenty sentences on it, we put the images away. The next step is to play around with the language on the paper as a basis for a poem. The students take out notebooks and use the found language as source material, adding their own language as needed.

T *Talking Things*

We start by reading a few poems where objects engage in conversations with each other—perhaps [Victor Hernández Cruz’s “Two Guitars,”](#) which is a conversation between two guitars about the men who play them; or [Jules Supervielle’s poem “The House Surrounded,”](#) which is a conversation between different elements of nature; or the [Robert Desnos poem “Sky Song,”](#) which is structured like a tiny play. For older students I might include [John Ashbery’s wonderfully surreal poem “Grand Abacus.”](#) After reading a handful of poems, everyone is given an image to write a poem about. I ask them to choose two objects, animals, or even shapes in the image, and have them engage in conversation. The image should be something complex and contain a number of animals and/or objects. The students can start by describing the scene or, if they wish, just jump into the dialogue.

U *Under*

We look at a sculpture at a gallery or in a garden. I ask them to describe what is under it.

W *When*

I give each student an image. For each picture, I ask them to write six unfinished sentences that start with the word “when.” In other words, they write the dependent clause part of the sentence. For example, looking at [Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*](#), one might write, “When the stars rotate the opposite direction of language...” or “When only the bush and the church speak the same language....” Each student then passes his statements to someone who hasn’t seen the image, and the second person finishes the sentences. Then a third person looks at the sentences and uses what he wishes as the start of a poem. He might choose to collage the lines, change them, or use one or two as a starting point.

X *X-ray*

I tell my students to imagine their eyes are X-rays and to use their special eyes to look deep within a painting. (This needs to be done in a gallery.) Usually painters change their work as they go along. In a poem, you discard what you don’t use, but a painter paints over the earlier “drafts,” so the original is still there under the image we see. I ask my students to look at an abstract painting and write what they see with their “poet X-rays.” The notes they come up with may be static, so after they gather notes I ask them to look away from the painting and try to animate the images they have created. For instance, the notes they have may be noun-heavy, so I ask them to rewrite what they have, making the sentences more active.

Y *You Are Not You*

I give everyone a reproduction of a painting or take them to a museum and have them pick a painting with a person in it. I then ask them to imagine they are the person in the painting, and give them a worksheet with a series of questions, such as “What do you smell? What does the smell remind you of? What do you hear? What does the sound remind you of? What color would the sound be? How does your body (your feet, arms, legs, etc.) feel? Describe what you see around you. What just happened? What did you dream last night? What is beyond the picture’s frame? What does the weather feel like?” After they finish the worksheet, I give them a couple of poems that repeat a line multiple times. I usually use [William Carlos Williams’ “To an Old Woman,”](#) and [Federico García Lorca’s “The Guitar.”](#) Then I ask them to repeat their favorite lines from their worksheets in a poem, and to think about playing with the line-breaks as the line repeats.

Z *Zingers*

For this exercise, we read [Joe Brainard’s “Mini-essays”](#) or “One Liners,” or [John Yau’s series of one-line poems from *Further Adventures in Monochrome*](#). Each mini-poem I share has a title—for example, “The Sky”: “We are so many different things when we look at the sky,” or “Humor”: “The man who slips on a banana peel may not think it’s funny, but it is.” I then give everyone a stack of images and have them write one zinger for each picture on an index card. In other words, they look at the image and try to think of something aphoristic to write in response. We then trade cards and write poems that start with our favorite borrowed zinger. 📧