

Detailed Memories: Emotions Triggered by an Object or Event For Grades Ten Through Twelve

by Shelley Savren

Details help us understand what's going on in a poem. The more specific the detail, the easier it is to imagine the picture; the more abstract, the less interesting. If readers are to enter a poem, they need to know where to sit down. We need rich descriptions and images so we can imagine the scene or the feeling. If we zoom in on an object or event that triggered those details, emotion will burst through in the poem.

As in the "First Time" lesson [see page 110], discuss the elements that comprise poetry. All poems come from our imagination. Poems are musical, sensual, and they tell about something, as stories do, but they do that in a rhythmical form, paying attention to the line.

Poems use a concise language. Each word must be exact and important to the poem. Also, most poetry today is written in free verse without rhyme. The father of free verse, Walt Whitman, saw everyone and every little thing as important. In his poem, "Song of Myself," he wrote, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars." He zeroed in on the smallest details: "And brown ants in the little wells."

1. "Today, we're going to focus on details. Imagine that you're in an art museum looking at a portrait of a woman wearing a royal blue dress. When you come closer to the portrait, you see that there are stripes of black on the dress. When you step back again, you realize that that's what makes the wrinkles."
2. "Today, we're going to put 'wrinkles' into our poems. Doing that makes the picture described in the poem look more real. We have to get in close to notice details, and sometimes we just need to pay attention. And we can use our imagination to see things that could be inside an object, or we can see that object through a new lens. Whitman saw the grass as many things, including 'the beautiful uncut hair of graves.'"
3. "Often we associate certain objects with experiences we've had. Today, we're going to zoom into an object or event, see all the details, and allow them to trigger a memory or emotion."
4. Read the poem by David St. John and talk about how the small boy watched his grandma leave on a train. He was holding an iris; as he got older he could look into an iris and remember that train taking his grandmother away. The emotion comes through in the details: "A train inside this iris. / It's a child's finger bearded in black banners," and "& now believe me: The train / Is gone. The old woman is dead, & the boy. The iris curls."
5. Ask a student to read the poem by Cameron Brooks, where a boy remembers that the last time he saw his father, his father picked him up and promised to return, but didn't. Point out that emotion comes through in the details: "I watched him vanish that night, / eight years to this day."
6. Ask students to write poems describing an object or event in great detail, allowing a memory related to it to trigger an emotion. Use the advice to writers on the worksheet.
7. Lastly, let students read their poems out loud (with no apologies). After each student reads, another student and the teacher should comment positively on what they liked about the poem.

Worksheet

Iris

Vivian St. John (1881–1974)

by David St. John

The text of this poem can be found by going to the following link:

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/iris>

Father

by Cameron Brooks, Ventura County

Ducking through the door,
striding across the room,
 he came.
His square face set with a smile,
 his eyes round and dark,
 sparkling in the light.
Five steps and he was across
 my room.
 There I was standing,
 a smile on my face.
 There I was standing,
looking straight up for miles
 just to see his face.
His massive hand came down,
 lightly patting me on the head.
Using both hands,
 he effortlessly lifted me into
 the air.
 From way up there,
I saw my home in a whole new way.
I laughed, I giggled . . . I was happy.
He said he couldn't stay long,
 but that was all right.
I knew he would be back,
 and that's all that mattered.
He placed me on the floor
 and said good-bye.
I watched him vanish that night,
 eight years to this day.

Advice to Writers

Write a poem about someone you loved or cared about who left you, or create an image of someone who's gone and whom you miss. Describe what happened in extreme detail, as if you are putting that person under a microscope for the reader to study. Create a picture with so much emotion folded in that it hurts to look at it.