

*It was real
I am
Most people are happy. / I am
The fire
The girl is happy. / The fire
Stomping and Storming
They were peaceful. / The girl is happy.
I like my dog. / The barbecuing smoke
The girl has
The fire is lit and the house is filled with the smell of pie and
The barbecuing smoke. / I am
Stomping and Storming. / I*



Lunch Bag Sestinas

Writing Collaborative Poems

BETH COPELAND

"Sassy baby."

"Monkeys dream monkey dreams."

"The fire is lit and the house is filled with the smell of pie and smoke."

"Every tear drop is a crystal and is beautiful."

THESE ARE SOME OF THE PHRASES children at Orrington Elementary School in Evanston, Illinois, pulled from brown paper lunch bags during a class I conducted on writing a collaborative sestina. The sestina, a traditional form used by contemporary poets, originated with twelfth-century French troubadours who competed by singing their intricately structured verses. Originally the form was written in rhyme, but most poets today write unrhymed sestinas. Too often children associate poetry with sing-song rhymes of the Dr. Seuss or Mother Goose variety, but my students enjoyed experimenting with this unrhymed form.

The creation of the sestina has been attributed to

French poet and mathematician Arnaut Daniel, and the form was popularized by Plutarch and Dante. It is fitting that a mathematician created the form given that it follows a numerical pattern. The Italian word "sestina" comes from the Latin root *sextus*, meaning "sixth," and refers to the sestina's six-fold pattern of repetition. If you're allergic to math, as I am, don't be alarmed! If you can count to six, you can teach your students to write a collaborative sestina.

The sestina consists of thirty-nine lines divided into six sestets (six-line stanzas) and one concluding tercet (three-lined stanza) called an envoy. The six end words of the first stanza are repeated in a prescribed order in the five sestets that follow. Some historians believe that the order in which the end words are repeated has its roots in numerology, but if so, the meaning of the formula has been lost. The best way to understand the form is to read a sestina and make note of the pattern used. For example, Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina" uses the end words *house, grandmother, child, stove, almanac, and tears*. In the envoy, the six end words are also repeated, one embedded in the middle of each line, and one at the end of each line:

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.

The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove

*Beth Copeland's book *Traveling Through Glass* received the 1999 Bright Hill Press Poetry Book Award. Her poems have been published in various literary journals and have received awards from Atlanta Review, North American Review, The North Carolina Poetry Society, and Peregrine. Two of her poems have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is an English instructor at Methodist University.*

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and the child draws another inscrutable house.

I chose Bishop’s poem as a sample sestina to read to fourth-grade classes because its description of a quiet evening spent with a grandmother is a subject familiar to most children. After reading the poem aloud, I asked the children to underline the words at the end of each line. Then I asked them if they noticed anything unusual about the structure of the poem. Some students noticed the repetition of the end words; others commented on the grandmother’s sadness or asked the meaning of unfamiliar words, such as *almanac*, *equinoctial*, and *inscrutable*.

After listening to their responses, I explained that a sestina is a special kind of poem using the same six end words over and over again in a specific order. Then I asked them what kind of mood the repetition creates in Bishop’s poem. Some children noticed that the theme of the rain was repetitive, and that using the same six words over and over again echoed the sound of falling rain. Some children thought the rhythm of the poem was like a lullaby or a grandmother’s rocking chair.

“Instead of writing individual poems,” I said, “we’re going to play a game and write a poem together as a class.” I gave each child a strip of paper and asked the students to write one word on the paper. It could be any word, as long as it wasn’t a name. (I’ve learned from experience that if students are allowed to use names they end up writing poems using classmates’ names that are at best silly and at worst unkind.) I asked a student to collect the strips of paper in a lunch bag marked “WORDS.” Then six students were each asked to draw one slip of paper from the bag. The words that were randomly drawn became the six end words we used in our collaborative sestina.

The children in Room 305 chose the words *fuzzy*, *fun*, *green*, *dreaming*, *dance*, and *light*, but somehow monkeys became the prevailing theme of the poem.

Students in Room 303 drew the words *baby*, *fish*, *baseball*, *sty*, *goodbye*, and *sunset* from their lunch bag; and students in Room 308 selected *smoke*, *pizza*, *storming*, *peaceful*, *happy*, and *dog*. My after-school class students, who ranged from second to fifth grade, chose the words *beautiful*, *egg*, *swipe*, *animals*, *dogs*, and *tears*.

Since teaching the children at Orrington Elementary School, I have added an extra step to the process. Before selecting the six end words, I ask the students to think of a theme or subject they would like to write about, encouraging them to select a topic that is inherently repetitious, like the falling rain in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem. Life is full of patterns and repetitions. For example, Anthony Hecht’s “Sestina d’Inverno” is about winter in Rochester, a season that is no doubt monotonous to people who are unable to take a vacation to a more temperate zone. In “On the Way Home from Nowhere, New Year’s Eve,” Miller Williams describes going to his office and trying to find some papers on his desk without turning on the light. The speaker is groping around in a dark room, and the structure of the poem itself becomes the form that helps him feel his way around in the darkness. Michael J. Bugeja’s sestina, “Sightings,” written about pilgrims at Lourdes, creates an almost ritualistic quality of incantation. Diane Wakoski takes advantage of the repetitive action of a slot machine in “Elvis at the Dollar Slotbank Sestina.” These poems may be too sophisticated to use with elementary school students, but would be appropriate choices for high school or college students.

I ask workshop participants to write a topic on a slip of paper and then collect their ideas in a lunch bag marked TOPIC. After a student draws a word from the TOPIC bag, I then ask each participant to think of one word related to that subject and write it on a strip of paper. Those words are collected in the WORDS lunch bag. By choosing a topic ahead of time, the lines contributed by the children are less random and more thematically connected.

If time allows, teaching the sestina also provides a great opportunity to introduce (or re-introduce) students to the concepts of homonyms, heteronyms, homophones, and word play, all of which are frequently used in sestinas. I would not recommend an exhaustive lesson on these concepts, but a brief discussion, with examples, as below, may enable your students to inject humor and variety into the collaborative poem.

Homonyms are words that sound the same and are spelled the same but have different meanings. For example, in “Elvis at the Dollar Slotbank Sestina,” Diane Wakoski uses the word *bar* in several different contexts: a bar where alcohol is served, triple bars on the slot machine, prison bars, and the verb *bar*, meaning to prevent something from happening.

Heteronyms are words with the same spelling but with different pronunciation and meanings. (For example, the word *bow* can refer to either a ribbon or an inclination of the head or body, and the word *wind* can mean either a breeze or a turning action.)

Homophones are words that sound alike but have different meanings and spellings. Michael J. Bugeja uses the words *Lourdes*, *lords*, and *Lord’s* in his sestina “Sightings.”

Word play may involve words that contain two or more words, or suggest two words by pronunciation, such as *amaze* (a maze), *diet* (dye it), and *mustache* (must ache). In my poem “Transcendental Telemarketer,” one of the six end words is *hello*. For variety I use a sentence that ends with the word *hell* and then start the next sentence with the word *Oh*.

In my Orrington classroom, once my students had selected six end words, I wrote them on the black-

board, listed as *A, B, C, D, E,* and *F*. Then I gave each student six strips of paper and asked them to write *A, B, C, D, E,* or *F* in the top-right corner of the strips. Next, I instructed them to write a sentence on each strip, ending with the word that matched its letter on the blackboard. If the “A” word on the board is “river” for instance, the sentence the student writes on the “A” strip of paper must end with the word “river.” (I use the term “sentence” with young students because many of them are not familiar with the term “line.”)

“Does it have to be a sentence?” some children asked, and I said no, they could write a phrase if they

preferred. Other students asked if they could write a question instead of a sentence, and I said yes. After they had finished writing, we collected all the A strips in the lunch bag marked A, all the B strips in the lunch bag marked B, and so on.

I then went from student to student, inviting them to draw one strip from each bag, to make a six-line stanza. The students read the lines aloud, and I put the strips of paper in envelopes marked STANZA 1, STANZA 2, etc. until we had selected lines for all six stanzas.

Because of time constraints, I did not ask the students to complete an envoy. I took the envelopes home, typed the collaborative poems on my computer, and printed a copy for each student. The students were excited to see their collaborative poems on paper the following week.

Despite the random nature of the activity, the results were sometimes comical, and occasionally surprising and eerily conjoined. For example, stanza three of “Fuzzy Green Monkeys Dance and Dream” (Room 305) ends with the line, “I like to dance,” and stanza four begins with its retraction, “I hate to dance.” Students in the after-school class were amazed to see

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that a question was answered in their collaborative poem. Stanza four ends with the question, “Do you like animals?” and stanza five begins with the answer, “I like animals.”

The last two lines of “Pizza, Smoke, and Happy Dogs” (Room 308) were accidentally tailored to offer a brief lesson on enjambment. One student wrote, “It was really storming,” and another student wrote, “Outside I smell smoke.” After typing up the poem and bringing copies to the students, I showed them how the two lines could be combined to make the poem more fluid and less choppy:

**It was really storming
outside. I smell smoke.**

The students in Room 303 broke into peals of laughter when a girl wrote the words “sassy baby” on her strip of paper and when the largest boy in the class selected “I’m a big, big baby” from the bag. One boy injected some TV humor into the poem with his line, “You are the weakest link, goodbye.”

While the poems created with this approach are usually more playful than polished, the process gives the students easy access to a complicated form, helps them to identify and appreciate non-rhyming forms in poetry, and familiarizes them with a number of poetic concepts. Most importantly, perhaps, it shows students that collaboration and play can be an essential part of the creative process. 😊

Pizza, Smoke, and Happy Dogs
ROOM 308

I see some things like smoke.
He bit into the hot pizza.
It was storming.
The day was so peaceful.
I was so happy.
I am a dog.

I like my dog.
The barbecuing smoke.
I am very happy.
I like to eat pizza.
The house is peaceful.
Stomping and Storming.

It was storming.
The girl has a dog.
Everything was peaceful.
In a house a chimney has smoke.
Some people make big pizzas.
Stepping into the spring air made me happy.

I’m so very happy.
It was storming.
I eat the cheesy pizza.
Some people have dogs.
The fluffy gray cloud of smoke.
The night so peaceful.

They were peaceful.
The girl is happy.
The fire is lit and the house is filled with the
smell of pie and smoke.
He stomped through the house, storming.
They had a dog.
Every Friday night we have pizza

parties with things like pizza.
People being peaceful.
My aunt’s dog.
Most people are happy.
It was really storming
outside. I smell smoke.

Step-by-Step Sestina

In the pattern shown below, each letter represents a specific end word. You can use this pattern to construct your collaborative sestina.

First Stanza

Line 1-A
Line 2-B
Line 3-C
Line 4-D
Line 5-E
Line 6-F

Third Stanza

Line 1-C
Line 2-F
Line 3-D
Line 4-A
Line 5-B
Line 6-E

Fifth Stanza

Line 1-D
Line 2-E
Line 3-A
Line 4-C
Line 5-F
Line 6-B

Second Stanza

Line 1-F
Line 2-A
Line 3-E
Line 4-B
Line 5-D
Line 6-C

Fourth Stanza

Line 1-E
Line 2-C
Line 3-B
Line 4-F
Line 5-A
Line 6-D

Sixth Stanza

Line 1-B
Line 2-D
Line 3-F
Line 4-E
Line 5-C
Line 6-A

Envoy

Line 1 — Two of the six words
Line 2 — Two of the six words
Line 3 — Two of the six words

Materials Needed to Teach Lunch Bag Sestinas

Eight lunch bags marked as follows: TOPIC, WORDS, A, B, C, D, E, F

Strips of paper or index cards: each student will need eight strips (or eight index cards)

Six envelopes marked as follows: STANZA 1, STANZA 2, STANZA 3, STANZA 4, STANZA 5, STANZA 6