

A Creative Writing Exercise for Science

Poems About Adaptation

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One day I pulled a few small groups aside and gave them an extra-credit assignment inspired by the reading I'd done in their textbook, which let me know that they'd been studying adaptations. This had given me the idea for a poetry assignment on personal/human adaptations: how do we adapt to our environments? As soon as I began discussing this idea with the students I pulled aside, I became sorry that there was no opportunity to do this exercise with everyone; the kids were so excited as they considered the ways humans have survived without such obvious advantages as sharp claws, wings or thick hides. They then began to explore the ramifications of that: we can deal with the weather because we can make coats and houses; we don't need claws because we can figure out how to make knives instead, etc. I also encouraged them to consider language as a key human adaptation, and the structure of our hands as well.

This experience prompted a real why-didn't-I-think-of-that-earlier moment: a writing exercise that was both truly science-related and also seriously fun.

This exercise can be adjusted to work for students from grades 3–8, depending on the sophistication of the discussion.

Begin by reading an excerpt from the screenplay for the movie *Adaptation* by Charlie Kaufman:

You know why I love plants? Because they're so mutable, so adaptable. Adaptation is such a profound process. [beat] Adaptation means you figure out how to survive in the world. People aren't too good at that sometimes.

- Is this true? Why/ why not? If it is, how have humans survived for so long and taken over so much of the Earth? We lack many adaptations

other animals have, so what do we have instead?

- Consider a number of animal adaptations, such as the warm fur of Arctic animals like the musk ox. Humans don't have fur, so how do we survive in the winter? If we make things like clothes and houses to replace fur, what adaptations do we have that let us do that?
- What about the teeth and claws of a predator like a jaguar? We don't have long, sharp claws, so how do we catch our food? What do we have that's equivalent?
- What about hive animals like bees that work together by instinct? How are humans able to work together on complex jobs?
- What about camouflage? Do humans have ways of camouflaging themselves? Is it camouflage when we try to fit in with a group? What about when we're shy and try not to be noticed?
- What do all our adaptations have in common?

The resulting writing assignment could be done with three variations: a poem on how humans have adapted to life on Earth, a poem on how the writer personally adapts to his or her environment, or a poem on how we might adapt to an imaginary environment like a new planet with different conditions.

Another variant would be to write a poem comparing and contrasting human adaptations with animal ones.