

Text Explosion

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THE “TEXT EXPLOSION” is a hallmark Writing & Thinking exercise because it seamlessly melds analytical and creative writing. It invites students to germinate ideas from the rich soil of distinguished wordsmiths like Mary Oliver. It also creates community as students work together to compose the text explosion. Oliver’s poem “Some Questions You May Ask,” is a good example of a poem to be “exploded” because most students will be able to respond to her questions with more questions, or thoughts of their own.

The poem opens:

Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is sad
as the face of Jesus.

To explode the poem, do the following:

1. Read aloud an entire poem, or ask a student to volunteer to read it.
2. Read the poem again by asking each student to read a line. Go around the table so the poem can be voiced by everyone. Instruct students to

underline the sentence in the poem, or image in the poem that is most compelling to them. For example, a student could underline “Is the soul solid, like iron?” or she could simply underline “the moose is sad.”

3. Now ask students to write a response to the sentence/image that stood out to them.
4. Now re-read the poem aloud again, pausing at the end of each line to allow students to jump in. Students will re-state the line from Oliver that inspired them, and then read their own jazz-riff on it.

An example of an “exploded” version of Oliver’s first two lines might read as follows, with the students’ words in italics:

Is the soul solid, like iron?

Is the soul solid, like iron? Or is a soul soft as smoke?
After my father died, I pictured the soul as smoky and gauzy. So I was surprised at Oliver’s image of the soul as iron. When I think of my aunt’s rusty iron-clad pans that she never washed so they retained decades of bacon-grease flavor, I am amused. I would like to imagine my father’s soul as strong as an iron pan.

**Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?**

Wings of a moth..I do not understand why moths are so attracted to the flame. I guess I don't understand our self-destructive tendencies. Why do some of us hurt ourselves, while others have an instinct towards self-preservation?

The overall effect is that the Oliver poem is "opened up." We see the poem in a newly complex way through the filter of every member of the class. 🗨️