



# The Taste of Happiness

## Teaching Students to Describe Emotions in Poetry

HARRIET RILEY

**A**S A FIRST-YEAR Writers in the Schools writer/teacher in Houston last fall, I have to admit I felt like I was entering an obstacle course blindfolded. Even though we had an information-packed day-long orientation and I shadowed an experienced WITS teacher for one class, I still felt like I was heading into my school blindly. I knew I had to jump right in and feel my way through all the challenges before I really felt any confidence at all.

I thought I would be comfortable in front of a classroom after teaching college journalism courses, but somehow facing a room full of expectant ten-year-olds was much more daunting than those jaded twenty-somethings of my previous experience. These bright-eyed fourth-graders' opinions really mattered to me.

After my first day of teaching I felt more confident with each lesson, and I loved coming to school

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each week to work with my fourth-graders. When that first year was complete, I decided to hone my skills by teaching at the Summer Creative Writing Workshops, co-sponsored by the School Literacy and Culture Project at Rice University and Writers in the Schools. As a writer, I was paired with a classroom teacher and we pooled our resources and skills to develop lessons that would inspire our summer camp students. One lesson that was especially successful in our two-hour time slot was called "The Taste of Happiness." Our objective was to get the children to learn to describe emotions in a tangible way.

We had taught simile the day before and our students were already getting quite adept at using "like" or "as" to make comparisons in their poems. We now wanted to go deeper into description by encouraging them to use their five senses to describe emotions and feelings.

I started out the lesson by asking the students how they felt when they woke up that morning. The question elicited lots of responses from my rowdy bunch of rising sixth-graders. "Sleepy and sad to wake up," said one. "Happy for camp," said another. "Mad that my mother woke me," said yet another. I suggested that words like sad, happy, and mad are used so often that they've almost lost their meaning; they tell us something, but leave so much out. I said that we needed to come up with better words to describe how

we feel. To start, I asked the children to tell me all the emotion words they could think of. I filled half of our large grease board with words like delighted, angry, frustrated, bored, depressed, stressed.

We reminded them of the five senses—seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting—and then asked the children to come up with a list of great sensory/descriptive words, calling on all of the senses. We filled up the other half of the board with words like *rough, smooth, slimy, slippery, frizzy, dry, soft, hard, freezing, burning, tangy, crisp, fragrant, burnt, sour, jangle, boom, rowdy, flash, muddy, lumpy, awkward, sturdy*, and more.

Then I told the children we were going to do an exercise where we used mystery bags to help stretch our vocabulary of descriptive sensory words. This was an idea from one of our long-time WITS writers. I simply prepared paper grocery bags partially stapled shut so that only a hand would fit inside and passed one to each group. Each bag contained an everyday household object with a bizarre or distinct feel, a unique smell or different type of sound: balled-up duct tape with the sticky side out, slivers of soap, unusually shaped dry pasta, “stinky” cheese, sandpaper, and an odd-shaped seashell. Any type of objects can be used. The point of the exercise is to force students to rely only on their sense of touch, hearing, and smell when examining each object.

I told the kids there were three rules for this activity: 1. Only one person reaches into, smells, and shakes the bag at a time, 2. you can’t look, and, 3. if you think you know what the actual object is—don’t say it out

loud. Before they got started, I told them to number their paper according to which bag their group received. Then I asked them to list as many sensory/descriptive words as they could for the object. I heard one group yell out, “rough, that feels rough.” I urged them to expand on this, using a more descriptive word, or a simile if they could. “How else does it feel?”

“Like my daddy when he doesn’t shave,” said one.

“Coarse, it feels coarse,” said someone else at the table.

“Good word,” I smiled.

“Write it down.”

Once this was done I gave them the somewhat harder task of matching these descriptive words with an emotion; for instance, I suggested, something smooth might feel happy or calm. Something knobbly might feel confused. Something with a sharp smell might feel stressed. Something that makes a loud bang might be excited. I told the students they could use the lists on the board if they wanted.

When they had written all they could I asked them to make a guess about what the object was. Finally, I had each group pass the bag to the next

group and begin the process again.

The students worked diligently, passing around the bags and wring down their sensory descriptive words and an emotion word. Coming up with the emotion word was trickier, but the students met the challenge with enthusiasm.

After excitedly revealing what was in each bag, I gave the children a short break. When they returned, I introduced the children to a simple poetic technique

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called *anaphora*. Anaphora is a type of repetition created when successive phrases or lines in a poem begin with the same words, often resembling a type of chant with a sing-song quality. This repetition, I told the students, can be as simple as a single word or as long as an entire phrase. This is a very old poetic technique, I said, and can be found in the poems in the Bible called Psalms and in the writing of William Shakespeare. I told them that a more modern American poet named Mark Strand, who has been the U.S. Poet Laureate, used anaphora in his poem, “From a Litany.”

I praise the trees on whose branches shall sit  
the Cock of Portugal and the Polish Cock.

I praise the palm trees of Rio and those that  
shall grow in London.

I praise the gardeners, the worms and the  
small plants that praise each other.

I also showed them the work of another American poet, Joe Brainard, who used anaphora in a book-length poem he wrote about his life called “I Remember.”

I remember one very hot summer day I put  
ice cubes in my aquarium and all the fish  
died.

I remember ‘lavender past.’ (He has a ...).

I remember after people are gone thinking of  
things I should have said but didn’t.

I asked the students if they could tell me what phrase was repeated in each poem. I then told them I wanted them to write a poem putting together all that we had learned that day. The assignment was to create a poem describing an emotion using their senses, and to write it using anaphora. We looked at their lists from the mystery-bag exercise and used some of the words for examples. “Happiness feels like slippery slime in the sun,” said one. “Happiness tastes like

## Love Like Salt

LISEL MUELLER

It lies in our hands in crystals  
too intricate to decipher

It goes into the skillet  
without being given a second thought

It spills on the floor so fine  
we step all over it

We carry a pinch behind each eyeball

It breaks out on our foreheads

We store it inside our bodies  
in secret wineskins

At supper, we pass it around the table  
talking of holidays by the sea.

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orange candy,” contributed another. I encouraged them to use other emotions and then they began coming up with tactile words to describe rage and loneliness.

Before they wrote their own poems, I read them a poem called “Love Like Salt,” by Lisel Mueller. I told them Lisel Mueller was born in Germany, moved to America for college, and became an award-winning poet and writing teacher. I asked the students to listen for the anaphora technique in Mueller’s poem and the sensory images she uses to describe a feeling or emotion.

The students were now more than ready to write their own poems. What emerged was amazing. They explored emotions like joy and concern. “Joy is the smell of chocolate,” said one child. “Concern is the makeshift cruise ship,” wrote another. “Disappointment is the rain cloud welling up before a

fun day at the amusement park.” Their innermost feelings were being expressed in tangible ways. There were so many wonderful lines written that at the end of class we decided to put them together into a group poem. Below are two of the student poems that emerged from this exercise.

### **Sadness**

**ERI YABE**

Sadness is the death of a loved one.  
It’s the tear coming out from your eyes.  
The empty box of tissues.

Sadness is having a broken heart.  
It’s the moving somewhere you don’t know.  
The wound that never heals.

Sadness is the floating fish that is in the  
bowl.  
It is the silence in your body.  
The forgetting of the past

### **Hope**

**ANGEL ZHANG**

Hope is like a diamond,  
resting in the rich earth.  
It is a child clinging to its mother in a sea of  
people,  
a rusted bicycle untouched.

Hope is the waves crashing against each  
other,  
the moon resting on the poofy clouds,  
the grass dancing to the rhythm of the wind.

Hope is the California redwoods that stand  
tall,  
the stars that watch us during the night.

Hope springs eternal.

I think I will never cease to be awestruck by the ability of children to use poetry to express their emotions. Often unfiltered, these emotions are refreshingly authentic and easily called up by young poets. It is a gift to be able to witness their work. Their self-assurance has transferred to me, the teacher, and has helped me to emerge, after my first year in the classroom, as a more confident and creative writing teacher. 🍷

## Our Many Feelings

CLASS POEM BY HARRIET RILEY'S STUDENTS, THE PENCIL DAGGERS:

SARAH, HELENA, KIRBY, ASAD, MIRA, ANGEL, ISABELLE, ALEX, BRANDON, ANNIE, JAY, CONNIE,  
CATHERINE, NEESHALI, ALYSSA, EDWIN, MEAGAN, ERI, BROOKE, MARIA, ZACHARIAH

Joy is the first step into middle school.  
It is the sprinkles on top of an ice cream  
cone.

Sadness is the tear coming out from your  
eyes,  
The empty box of tissues.

Joy is the smell of chocolate.  
It is the first bite of cake.

Pain is the knee being scraped on the side  
walk.  
It is the shame of walking out the door.

Blue is the tears of a person.  
It is the sadness of the person's heart.

Disappointment is the rain cloud welling up  
before a fun day at the amusement park.  
It is the feeling when you are short a quarter  
unable to buy that piece of gum.

Joy is the melted marshmallow with honey.  
It is the dark chocolate with milk.

Shame is ripping your pants without noticing.  
It is the embarrassment of mistaking  
someone else for your Dad.

Hope is like a diamond resting in the rich  
earth.  
It is a child clinging to her mother in a sea of  
people.

Furious is the power to hate your brother.  
It is the brother that annoys you.

Concern is the makeshift cruise ship.  
It is the greatest, the call of your mind.

Depression is the pain of ropes tied across  
your chest.  
It is tasting rotten chocolate.

Joyfulness is the moment you graduate from  
school.  
It is the joy of getting a job.

Depression breaks you down till you don't  
feel anything.  
It is like having a broken heart till you can't  
live.

Joy is like candy dissolving in your mouth as  
you suck on it.  
It is the liveness in your life.

Hatred is the heights on a really tall building.  
It is the fear that I'll fall.

Joy is the first ever time you eat a  
marshmallow.  
It is the last second of your homework.

Concern is the holding hands of a mother and  
child.  
It is the padlock on the fence. The medical  
center in a city.

Joy is the start of a new day.  
It is the love of your pets.

Refreshing is the fuzzy feeling after a long,  
comfy slumber.  
It is the cold lemonade after a hot, sticky  
summer day.