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The Story in History

Writing Your Way into the American Experience

by Margot Fortunato Galt

The following is excerpted from Margot Fortunato Galt's The Story in History: Writing Your Way into the American Experience, which T&W has just published. —Editor

Circle Poems in the Indian Spirit

(For elementary school level to adult.)

This exercise will introduce students to the differing attitudes and customs of Native Americans and Europeans, in what I call "A Circle Poem of Praise in the Native American Spirit."

Step One: Reading Model Poems

For this exercise, I first read a poem by Darrel Daniel St. Clair, of the Tlingit tribe. Born in Alaska, St. Clair was a teenager when he wrote this poem, which suggests another kind of school, one without walls:

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My school the earth.
My teachers,
The sky, the clouds, the sun, the moon,
The trees, the bushes, the grass,
The birds, the bears, the wolves,
The rivers, whom I claim to be
My mad genius.
Once I missed a day
Because they tried to make
Me learn it from the books
In a little room
That was really too stuffy.
I hope my teachers don't

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Put me on the absent list.
 I enjoy going to that school
 Where the air is fresh.
 Where nothing is said and I learn
 From the sounds.
 From the things I touch,
 From all that I see.
 Joy to the world and
 I've fallen in love with my teachers.

Step Two: Using Stickers and Circles

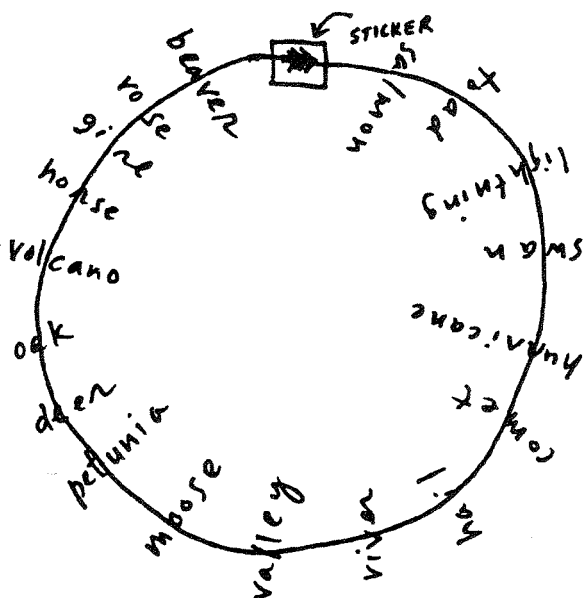
After the students and I discuss how St. Clair's school is different from theirs, I hand out a wildlife sticker to each student. (I collect these stickers showing trees, birds, or other animals from organizations such as the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, and Greenpeace.) I then hand out big sheets of newsprint and have the students fold them in half and draw a moderate-sized circle on one half, leaving enough room to write on either half. "Stick the sticker somewhere on the circle," I tell them.

It's possible to do this exercise without the stickers, but I find that the activity of licking and sticking appeals to young students, and gives them an illustrated example of some growing, living thing—a spruce tree, arctic fox, leopard, chipmunk, or chickadee. This gets them started thinking about what they know of the outdoors.

Step Three: Two World Views

Next I outline two ways of looking at the world: the Indian way and the way of people of European ancestry. To schematize these differences, I draw a pyramid and a circle on the chalkboard.

I tell them that the Indian way sees the world as a circle: humans occupy a place in the circle, but so does everything else in the natural world—rivers and hail and beavers and cardinals and jackrabbits and canyons and meadows and roses and thistles and creeks and oceans and whales and on and on. As I say these names I write them around the circle, as in:



Then I tell students that although humans may kill animals and plants for food, humans belong to the circle, too, and must also learn from everything else in it. In other words, we are neither better than, nor separate from, the other life forms in the circle.

The European way tends to see the world as a pyramid, with a supreme divinity at the top. Further down the pyramid are angels and then humans, after which come other living things, ranked according to their smartness or complexity or similarity to us. Students quickly grasp this concept, and can soon say that apes and monkeys should come under humans, then dogs and cats and hoofed animals, then other mammals, then birds and fish, then insects, then trees, then plants, then maybe water, maybe fire, maybe air, maybe dirt. The reasoning goes this way: as we descend lower on the pyramid, the things we add have "less life" and "less importance"—it is all right for humans to use them because these things can't feel anything and don't have a spiritual life.

Step Four: Writing Nature into the Circle

In the next step, the class adds any forms of natural life they want to their circles. I help by listing categories on the board: Animals, Plants, Fish, Birds, Weather, Sky and What's in It, Water, Landscape, Dirt, Fire, Air. I urge students to be as specific as possible in their lists, to put *salmon*, rather than *fish*; to put *eagle* rather than *bird*.

Step Five: Looking at Another Model

Next I read N. Scott Momaday's "The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee." Momaday, one of the best-known contemporary Native American writers, comes from the Kiowa tribe that originated in Montana but migrated to Oklahoma.

I am a feather on the bright sky
 I am the blue horse that runs in the plain
 I am the fish that rolls, shining, in the water
 I am the shadow that follows a child
 I am the evening light, the luster of meadows
 I am an eagle playing with the wind
 I am a cluster of bright beads
 I am the farthest star
 I am the cold of the dawn
 I am the roaring of the rain
 I am the glitter on the crust of the snow
 I am the long track of the moon in a lake
 I am a flame of four colors
 I am a deer standing away in the dusk
 I am a field of sumac and the pomme blanche
 I am an angle of geese in the winter sky
 I am the hunger of a young wolf
 I am the whole dream of these things

You see, I am alive, I am alive
 I stand in good relation to the earth
 I stand in good relation to the gods
 I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful
 I stand in good relation to the daughter of *Tsen-tainte*
 You see, I am alive, I am alive.

The “Delight Song” beautifully expresses the connection of humans to all the wealth and variety of nature. I ask the class to notice how precisely each description brings to life what Momaday has noticed. We also talk about what it means to “stand in good relation.” Students often suggest that relation means relatives and good relation means treating relatives kindly and respectfully. I tell them that this poem is a love song, of course, not just to the daughter of Tsen-tainte, but to the whole world.

Step Six: Writing Poems about Nature’s Teaching

I tell the class that we are now going to write our own songs of good relation. In our poems, one part of the circle will teach something to another part. Students should begin by connecting with a straight line two names in their circles, such as beaver and moon. To get them started, I take beaver and moon and write the first line of my poem on the board: “The wet brown beaver leaps in the stream and shows the sad sliver of moon how to fill with rain.”

Next we brainstorm some other words for *teach*, such as *preach, demonstrate, educate, show, display, learn, understand, prove, etc.*

Then on the other half of the paper, beside their circles, I have students start drafting their poems, making each stanza take off from a connection they’ve drawn between two parts of the circle. Here is such a poem, by Heidi Bakken, a fourth grader:

The goat teaches
the mountain how to sing.
The moon told
the people how to be quiet.
The old woman made
the elm tree come alive
and he liked that.
The hail was in the sky, so
he told the star to come too.
The deer told
the old man, I like you.
The goat got shaped
like a cloud because
he looked at it.

To cap off this exercise, you can also have students create a collaborative poem using some of the best lines from each student’s circle poem. Here is an example from a fifth grade class:

The parrot can show the moon how to talk.
The ladybug teaches lava to fly.
The snake shows the hurricane how to eat a mouse.
The Appalachians teach the moon how to make rocks.
The stars demonstrate to the garter snake how to shine brightly.
The rattlesnake teaches the ground to rumble.

Like the circle diagram itself, these poems circle around and around in an endless chain of influence.

Writing a Tall Tale

(For junior high level to adult.)

From the very beginning of European settlement, travelers and settlers fell into the habit of exaggeration. Since the game, crops, rivers, forests, storms, and distances in Europe were dwarfed by those of America, exaggeration was a natural device for conveying the newcomers’ astonishment. Loneliness and solitude no doubt contributed to the tale-telling. Settlers yearned for someone to tell about their adventures. When the occasional traveler—particularly one fresh from Europe—knocked at their door, they were more than ready to let out long pent-up tales. The wilderness settler could embroider as much as he liked. Who would correct him? He could make out his difficulties three times worse than they’d been, or even go as far as to create an entirely new persona for himself. His fancy could range free, and the long trips by stagecoach or on horseback gave him plenty of time to refine his exaggerations.

Think of Paul Bunyan, with his blue ox Babe, the hero of lumber camps. With his superhuman strength Paul could uproot huge trees with a twist of his wrist, reroute a raging torrent, or stop a tornado, and then sit down in the lumberjack dining hall and consume mountains of pancakes and cascades of syrup. Paul Bunyan was more than a match for the immense new land, and the tales about him heartened lesser mortals who quailed before the endless forests and flash floods.

Step One: Reading an Excerpt from a Tall Tale

True-life accounts of American fecundity suggest some possible origins of these hyperboles. Francis Higginson’s 1630 account, *New England’s Plantation*, had this to say about corn: “Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty [fold increases] are abundant here.” The numbers of animals almost made him stutter with amazement: he knew of fishermen who filled two boats at one time with nets so heavy they could scarcely draw them in. New England, Higginson told his English readers, is more healthful than anywhere else in the world.

Two centuries later (1845) an advertisement for Arkansas talked up the place with even more enthusiasm and exaggeration:

Strangers, if you’d asked me how we got our meat in Arkansas . . . I never did shoot at but one, and I’d never forgive myself for that, had it weighed less than forty pounds. . . . You see, the thing was so fat that it couldn’t fly far; and when he fell out of the tree, after I shot him, on striking the ground he bust opened behind, and the way the pound gobs of tallow rolled out of the opening was perfectly beautiful.

Not all the reports of America boasted of its vast benefits; some bemoaned the immensity of American catastrophe. In the 1840s, traveling by stagecoach in West Virginia, J. S. Buckingham recounted hearing men talk about the unhealthy condition of the Illinois river: “One asserted he had known a man to be so dreadfully affected with ague from sleeping in the fall on its banks, that he shook . . . all the teeth out of his head.” The next two storytellers topped that tale by describing a man so sick with ague he shook off all his clothes and the fourth had the poor man shake a house down around his ears.

It took men and women larger than life to control and combat the immensity of America. Davy Crockett (1786–1836) was a shrewd politician, hunter, fighter, drinker, and raconteur, and eventually was elected to Congress. An English captain traveling through Kentucky heard about Davy Crockett everywhere:

He took hailstones for “Life Pills” when he was unwell—he picked his teeth with a pitchfork . . . fanned himself with a hurricane. He could . . . drink the Mississippi dry—shoot six cord of bear in one day.

The anonymous tale, “Mike Fink Beats Davy Crockett at a Shooting Match,” demonstrates how such exaggeration built on itself. At one point in the exchange of boasts, Crockett bends back Mike’s ear with the following tirade:

Mike, I don’t exactly like to tell you you lie about what you say about your rifle, but I’m d—d if you speak the truth, and I’ll prove it. Do you see that ’are cat sitting on the top rail of your potato patch, about a hundred and fifty yards off? If she ever hears agin, I’ll be shot if it shan’t be without ears.’ So I blazed away, and I’ll bet you a horse, the ball cut off both the old tom cat’s ears close to his head, and shaved the hair off clean across the skull, as slick as if I’d done it with a razor, and the critter never stirred, nor knew he’d lost his ears till he tried to scratch ’em.

Step Two: Creating an American Frontier Character

Some standard types on the frontier from which students can choose are: farmer, blacksmith, tanner, teacher, politician, boatman, trapper, hunter, peddler, housewife, merchant (both male and female), cook (women cooked in logging camps), lumberjack, and fisherman. Unlike their urban counterparts, women on the frontier often worked alongside the men.

Part of the fun of developing these types into distinctive characters comes in creating humorous names for them, such as combining a familiar first name with a compound last one (joining an item from the person’s life with a common suffix): a boatman might be named Jim Sternfoot; a teacher might be named Nancy Rulerman; a farmer’s daughter might be named Karen Shootfast.

Using word mapping, students place the name of the character in the center of a piece of paper. Then they brainstorm the tools the character would use at work, making sure that these are accurate to the frontier: hoe, harrow, plow, oxen and horse, churn, iron kettle, anvil. Next I have students add features of the landscape: a waterfall, meadow, canyon, high bluff, road, or path. Finally, I have them add weather (tornado, hail storm, drought) and clothing (buckskin breeches, gingham apron, sunbonnet, clogs, sheepskin coat, coonskin cap).

Step Three: Creating Drama through Exaggeration

Many of the tall tales begin with small boasts and end with earth-wrenching occurrences. So rule number one for writing a tall tale is to start small and gradually build larger and larger. This gradual approach makes the tale more credible.

Next I have students imagine a situation that plays with the standard elements of the American tall tale: fecundity, extreme weather, loneliness, isolation, competition, and reversals of expectations. I ask students to recall the advertisement for

Arkansas where the bird falls out of the tree and disgorges gobs of tallow, and to imagine pumpkins the size of wagon wheels, partridges so plump that . . . , corn so tall that . . . , rivers so unhealthy that . . . , hail so big that . . . , snow so deep that . . . , trees so tall that . . .

A variation on this is a tall tale about school. Older students can write such tales, using the strategies suggested in this exercise, but transferring them to such topics as lunch, teachers, lockers and the amount of stuff in them, grades, books, the library or media center, water fountains, stairways clogged with students rushing from class to class, gym, teams, the principal, and so on. Then they can read the tales to younger students from the same school, who will probably make a very appreciative audience.

Back to pioneers. Another thing I remind students is that just as the pioneers competed with the wilderness, they also competed with each other. When the frontiersman who has bested the biggest bear in the mountains meets up with another hunter, he’s going to want to boast and outdo him with the same stamina that brought down the bear.

Surprise is a staple of good stories; in tall tales it often means that what first seems a blessing turns out to be a curse in disguise: the ten pumpkins the size of wheels rot and spread their stench over the barnyard, the chickens flee, the pigs stampede, and the horses break through the barn walls in their eagerness to get away.

Step Four: Reading Some Models

Here are some tall tales by students. Listen for the distinctive voice of the narrator in each example. This is not the normal speaking manner of the author; instead, the narrator is a fictitious persona, a garrulous talker who won’t let the listener get in a word edgewise. In a sense, the narrator is a fast-talking con artist, aiming not so much to capture the listener’s belief as to keep the listener so interested and so quiet that the question of whether the incidents really happened will never come up.

Karen Shootfast, Farmer’s Daughter

Karen Shootfast was a weird child, she did not grow like a regular farmer’s daughter. “No way,” she must have said at birth, because this child grew strong and beautiful, she had the looks of an angel princess and the shape of a picture that would never be drawn more perfectly. Well, let me tell you about this Karen Shootfast. Her daddy was sickly and her mother died at her birth. She was such a different child. They were so poor they did not even live in a barn. They lived in a cave near town. Karen Shootfast thought from the age of five months that she had better start talkin’, walkin’ and shootin’, and believe it or not, she did. Ol’ Karen Shootfast learned to talk an alligator into giving her his skin; she learned to walk better than Lady Isabel herself and shoot, this girl could shoot an ant a mile away. That’s where she got her name, Karen Shootfast.

At the age of thirty-two, she came to town with her sickly father and there was a bank robbery. She grabbed her daddy’s fifty-year-old pocket pistol and before the sheriff could move to shoot, she shot the socks off both of the robbers as they ran out of the bank, without touching a hair on their legs. Then she showed the town just how good a shot she was. She had a showdown with both robbers and these were the fastest gunmen in the west. She shot them both with one shot. Three women and the sheriff fainted and the preacher dropped dead with such

a shock in their bones. Old Karen grew up to be the best and the prettiest gal in the west.

—*Markeela Thomas, 10th grade*

Fisherman

How do you do! I'm Mike Salmon, fisherman. I'm gonna tell you 'bout a day that I went fishing. Boy, that day I needed more than one man to catch the fish as I brought them in with my pole. I could actually walk on the water there were so many fish. I had to walk (on the water of course) to the shore to get another boat because the one I had was starting to sink from all the fish. I tried to pull up the anchor, but the fish were so thick that it was like trying to pull through ice. By the end of the day, I caught so many fish they filled five boats. I caught all of the fish in the sea with a bare hook. It is now called the Dead Sea.

—*David Bixler, 10th grade*

Henry Joes, the Trapperkeeper

Once there was a trapper named The Trapperkeeper, alias Henry Joes. His arms were the size of redwood trees. He could lift a log cabin at the blink of an eye. When he walked around, he made trenches wherever he walked. His skills at trapping were excellent. He didn't even use traps. With his monstrous voice, he screamed at the top of his lungs and scared all the animals in the forest to death. To shave his face he had to use a saw blade, and he took baths in the Pacific Ocean and showered at Niagara Falls, and then dried off in a tornado. His knife Charlie was so sharp that he could cut the earth in half. For dinner he ate nails and drank lava from a volcano. Him and Paul Bunyan had a fight and made huge crevices in the ground, which is now called the Grand Canyon.

—*Vinny Corbo, 10th grade*

Lena Lutefisk

One day Lena Lutefisk decided to go fishing with her husband Ole Lutefisk and some Germans. They left at 6 A.M. and were to arrive home at 5 P.M. When noon came they still hadn't caught anything and wanted Lena to make a dinner for them. Lena wanted to stay fishing, unlike the others who were playing cards. Lena decided to go fishing and serve dinner at the same time. She put the pole between her long toes and mixed up some soapy water. She then waited for a fish to bite. She felt a tug and pulled up the fish with her feet. Then while she cleaned off the scales with a knife, she baited the hook with her feet. She cast the bait into the water with her long toes and threw the fish in the soapy water, which produced lutefisk! She repeated the process over and over again and soon the others noticed what she was doing and thought it would be a good idea, only they were still playing cards. Each of them tried it, but Ole was the only one to succeed, for the Germans' toes were too short and the pole kept slipping. Soon the news was all over Delaware about the Norwegian's great feet.

—*Joya Bromeland, 8th grade*

Step Five: Shaping the Tale

A good way to start the story is to set the scene and introduce the main character. It's a good idea to emphasize one or two characteristics of the person, using lots of details.

Then the exaggeration can start. It's important to begin with something fairly commonplace—pumpkins, a bear, some logs, pancakes, horseshoes, etc.—then gradually increase the exaggeration until the whole world in the tale seems out of control.

Creating a Writing Assignment with an Historical Slant

Many of my writing ideas come from collaborating with classroom teachers. Usually I arrive for a one-week writing residency and find, after discussion, that the teacher and I agree where writing will fit into the curriculum. Maybe the teacher already uses an "American Studies" approach, teaching about a particular historical period not only from the political and military perspective but also from the cultural one, playing records of seventeenth-century English folk songs and showing slides of Williamsburg houses, candle-making molds, cross-stitched samplers, and curtained beds.

Imaginative writing fits almost anyplace in the history or social studies curriculum. Some courses offer this opportunity more readily than others, of course. Learning about the houses of Congress and the doctrine of separation of powers is fairly abstract and hard to respond to personally, but following a tax bill all the way from its proposal to its application can show how families with different incomes are affected by such a bill. In such a case, creative writing can draw out an empathetic response.

But how to structure an exercise? What models to use? Let's start with the last question first. Over the years I've developed a sense for what kind of literature makes teachable models for elementary or high school students. I can't trace how this sense developed, but I can indicate some hallmarks of a good model.

First, it has to be structured clearly. Structural techniques include ones you probably learned in freshman English: comparison and contrast; sequence (in other words, an organized list of some kind); a gradual accretion of detail that reaches a climax; a story (or image) within a story (for instance, an essay might begin with a contemporary experience, recall an historic one, then return to conclude in the present). If by its structure a piece of writing can't help students order and focus their ideas, it won't work well in the classroom.

I've also learned that the historically apt model isn't necessarily the one most likely to elicit interesting writing from students. Writing a ballad about a Williamsburg tailor, in the mode of ballads popular in the 1700s, might give students practice using details of daily life from the period, but chances are it wouldn't spring them across the distance between their own lives and the past. A contemporary model, however, might lead students to see the relationship between "hip" styles of dressing and the tools and fabrics of the 1990s, and so begin to give them an understanding of the history of the dandy. Such an approach links an historical period and a contemporary writing model, and opens the students' writing to empathy, one fundamental reason for introducing creative writing into the study of history in the first place. When students empathize with people from the past, they dig a tunnel through the years and the accumulated ideas about the past, and let voices echo back and forth from past to present.

But a contemporary model has to be rooted in the same cultural background as an historical one. Having a Williamsburg tailor sketch out his life in Japanese haiku might be funny, but the value would end there. Haiku is too divergent from the Western tradition to capture the swagger and panache

of the comic-heroic Western dandy, circa 1750 or 1990. A rap song, on the other hand, blends rhythms and oral exaggeration that have come into the U.S. from the complicated cultural mixture of the Caribbean: distinctive but not totally divorced from the mixture that formed the ballads sung in a Williamsburg tavern a few hundred years ago.

The point is to help student writers take a fresh look at the past. If you're dressed in knee pants, with your hair in a queue, and wearing a flared frock coat, you may be almost as well suited to riding a motorcycle as a horse, but fighting a battle in the French and Indian War from a motorcycle would be nearly impossible: no roads through the woods, no gas stations. When students bring contemporary models to bear on historical experience, they begin to appreciate significant differences in the way life was lived, felt, and valued.

Contrasting past and present is not the only hallmark of an evocative literary model or writing exercise. Sometimes introducing an unusual point of view into the past can also activate the imagination. Take the poem "Dog" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. A modern work—free verse, urban details, 1950s politics—this teachable poem is easy to analyze, with its repeating refrain, jaunty rhythm, and humorous take on the urban scene from a dog's perspective. All these elements are easy to adopt, but the crucial one is the dog's attitude toward human affairs: he sees through human pretense, and measures it against his own reality.

When I first brought "Dog" into a classroom, I hadn't begun to plumb the psychological possibilities in the dog as an historical witness. I simply used the poem to help students of all ages become keener observers of their surroundings. The poems that students wrote were all contemporary. Then a social studies teacher asked me to create an exercise on racial prejudice. I wanted to show his ninth grade class that racial prejudice existed even in Minnesota, with its small percentage of people of color and its history of racial tolerance. A trip to the state historical society's audio-visual room netted a surprise: engravings and photographs of lynchings that had taken place in the state between the 1880s and 1920s. Since I had already used photographs to inspire other writing, I sensed that I could devise an exercise around the photos. I made photocopies and wrote down what little information existed about them.

I still needed a point of entry, some slant to help the class address the admittedly horrible scenes. For some reason I can't explain, I thought of "Dog." Using it, I could show the students how to create an animal witness to the lynchings, and the relief of escaping from the heavy human atmosphere would, I hoped, help the writers leaven the horror and see past the rationale for the lynchings to their sad reality.

The results were mixed: the students did a good job of trotting out animal characters, but their take on the lynchings was too pat. The animals either simply reported what happened without interpreting at all, or they mouthed the standard liberal assessment of racism.

Back to the drawing board. An eighth grade teacher gave me another hint: using *To Kill a Mockingbird* in conjunction with "Dog" gives students a full-fledged reading experience about the racism that led to lynching in the early decades of the

century. You can't read Harper Lee's novel without experiencing from the inside the complicated social and psychological realities of living in a racist town. Students today may experience their own versions of prejudice, but they probably need this novel, or other readings like it, to understand the particular mixture of ignorant suspicion, hair-trigger mob psychology, and the codified division between the races that spawned lynchings. The children in Harper Lee's novel not only grow up learning the racial code, but they are also innocent enough to see around it: similar to the animal character that initially attracted me.

It was, then, an easy step from reading the novel to writing about the trial in it or an historical lynching from an animal's point of view. I had fleshed out the exercise with enough background information to help students understand the complications of historical experience, and in "Dog" I had also given them a fresh, provocative model for framing their insights.

Where can you find wonderful models like "Dog," and how can you bring students through a writing process that will prepare them to draft their work? As a writer myself, I am always on the lookout for poems and stories and essays that inspire me. I happen across lots of writing simply by dipping into anthologies, attending readings of new writing, and taking tips from friends about good books. None of these activities demands any special expertise—anybody with a reasonably open mind and some teaching experience can encounter pieces of writing that bring out an "ah-ha" of certainty: this poem (or essay or story) will work with students.

Mainly, you have to be on the lookout, and not only for the standard fare. Try established writers and newcomers, writers from various ethnic, racial, and geographical backgrounds. Pablo Neruda's odes appeal to many contemporary poets in the United States; yet, few classroom teachers seem to know of them. The odes exist in various editions and anthologies in good bookstores and libraries, but they haven't really made it into standard textbooks. The moral here is: branch out. Go into a bookstore or library occasionally on Saturday morning, wander around, leaf through books, let yourself read a little here and there. If you find something that you like, pause and ask yourself if you can make it relevant for your students. If the answer is yes, buy the book or borrow it from the library. You're on your way to devising an exercise.

Then, as you create the exercise, remember some of these general steps for leading students into and through their own writing:

- Use conversation to explore students' personal responses to the historical and literary material. Conversation in a classroom can do more than a mere question-and-answer approach. Conversation can begin to give students language about their own experiences and reactions to history that can then be set down in writing.

- The next step is to create a classroom collection of words and images. I usually do this on the board, with some sort of word mapping to which the whole class contributes; or, with older students, I make a map of my own on the board, and let the students make their own. Often what students put on their maps is a flushing out of received or hackneyed ideas

(sometimes along with fresh, personal observation), but when the time comes to draft, the students will go beyond what they've put on their maps and write with new inspiration.

- Talking about ways to organize a piece of writing with a class can next point students toward selecting, shaping, and intensifying what resources they have gathered. The exercises in my book *The Story in History* offer examples of how this has worked with various models and historical resources.

- I try to remain attuned to the mood and understanding of a class as I am presenting an exercise. Each group of students differs—some need a lot more talking to, a lot more breaking up of directions into little steps, than do others. Sometimes I have to improvise on the spot when I discover that students don't know what to do with a set of instructions that I thought were clear and helpful. Often, first doing some of the work collectively will then allow students to proceed individually.

- Once students are writing, I move from desk to desk to identify strong phrases, answer private questions, read aloud good drafts, and help students who are stuck. As I work with individual students in this public setting, I am beginning to develop the class as an audience for each other's writing and to prepare the students for reading their work aloud.

- Reading aloud what they have written satisfies students' curiosity about each other's work and helps them learn other strategies for writing. For the readers, the experience helps

gauge what is communicated—the class laughs or responds soberly at appropriate places. Reading aloud also lets the writer hear clunky or marvelous phrases and begin to assess the total impact of the piece.

- Revision is an important step but is not necessary for every piece of writing. I often pair students to work on revision and ask them to give each other several questions or comments to identify strengths and weaknesses that the writers can then address.

- As a final step, a class can consider what their creative responses to the past have helped them understand. This response may be as simple as a second grader's, who created a new name for herself "in the Indian spirit," and said, "I like my new old Dakota name." Or, it may be as complex as a high school student's reflecting on his new understanding of war, after writing a Civil War ballad. This analytical coda to the writing exercise is important, because it allows students a wider sense of the various purposes of writing and the many ways we gain new knowledge of an historical period.

So you see, there isn't a simple method that will result in an instant assignment. What matters most is that the historical material really interests you, that you think it can interest your students, and that you remain willing to enter into the adventure of trying it with them.



Typing Test

by Tony Towle

BY THE TIME THE THICK BROWN BOX ENCLOSSES the xenophobic fog the two halves of the brain should be working together: the left, with its nose to some rational grindstone, and the right, which was probably off gathering wool somewhere. That is, the *reasonable* letters of h, j, k, l, n, m, y, u, i, o, & p will be interacting with the illusory, or "off-the-wall" letters of a, s, d, f, g, b, v, c, x, z, q, w, e, r, & t. One's own name, for example, might start out with letters that are logical enough and then get a bit screwy toward the end. But do you remember when the human race had to write "by hand"? Certainly a great deal of irrational nonsense was dashed off by right-brained left-handed authors (Blake and Dos-toevsky, for two), before the typewriter imposed the practice of having the two brains cooperate, thus insuring the intelligent balance of the modern movement.

To be sure, whether the writer was right- or left-handed, there was always the issue of the unused digits in those far-off days. They could help keep the parchment from moving for a while, until the inevitable boredom would cause them to wander off, most often to the writer's lap, an unwholesome situation that released a centuries-long torrent of superfluous erotic imagery, infiltrating even the composition of religious disquisitions, as in St. Augustine. John Donne had the good fortune to lose an arm in mid-career—resulting in the abrupt elevation of his concerns; Milton, of course, classical as always, went literally blind from this phenomenon: "a sinister hand in the nether land," as he tellingly mumbled on his deathbed, and took the precaution of having his daughters take his dictation with both hands at once. Thomas Aquinas strapped the left hands of his monkish scribes painfully behind their backs and so forth, the two minutes by now being up.

TONY TOWLE is the author of many books of poetry. "Typing Test" is from his most recent book, *Some Musical Episodes* (Hanging Loose Press, 1992).



Joyful Noise Resounds

The New Look of an Old Form

by Carol F. Peck

EVER SINCE PAUL FLEISCHMAN PUBLISHED his poems for two voices (*I Am Phoenix* in 1985 and the Newbery Award winner *Joyful Noise* in 1988), children and adults have delighted in their wit, their subtle sounds, and especially in the idea of a poem written in two side-by-side columns, each read by a different voice. And many teachers have used these poems in their classrooms, helping students not only to perform them aloud but also to write their own two-voice poems.

Of course, the idea of intertwining voices is far from new. Since the advent of polyphony (“many voices”) in the ninth century, many musical forms have employed that effect. In 13th-century motets, for example, more than one melody and more than one text were sung simultaneously by several voices; some motets were even polylingual (French and Latin). Simpler forms, such as canons, rounds, and madrigals, have featured the repetition of the melody by several voices in overlapping succession, for a polyphonic effect. The descant, an early form of which added a high, contrasting part to an existing song, is still popular today. Opera is an ideal polyphonic medium for several people to be singing about different concerns, all at the same time. Indeed, at the end of Act 2 of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, a duet gradually grows to a septet, with the characters singing different words, in perfect musical harmony, for twenty minutes. And more recent songs, such as “Side By Side,” “Baby, It’s Cold Outside,” and even “The Orchestra Song” (a summer camp song popular in the 1950s) call for simultaneous singing of different words and tunes.

Simultaneity was also popular, in the early part of the 20th century, with Cubist painters, who attempted to show all aspects of a figure or an object at once, or to show motion over a period of time, in simultaneous fashion, as in Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912). That same year, Robert Delaunay founded a movement, named “Orphism” by Guillaume Apollinaire, devoted to the “simultaneous contrast” on canvas of various swirls and patches of contrasting intense colors. And the Dadaists celebrated simultaneity in both painting and poetry; it appeared in virtually all Dadaist perfor-

mances and publications. (They did not claim to have invented the form, citing predecessors such as Apollinaire’s visual poems, which could be read from all sides at once.) A heightened sensitivity to the simultaneous occurrence of many different events led, they felt, to a grasp of what Dadaist poet Richard Huelsenbeck called “a swift meaning of life,” a “forming force”; a simultaneous poem meant “nothing but ‘Hurrah for life!’” In the 1950s and 60s, poets such as Henri Chopin, Bernard Heidsieck, and Jackson Mac Low, as well as musicians such as Steve Reich and Glenn Gould, used various kinds of simultaneity in their text-sound art: poetry in which the *sounds* of words or syllables, rather than their syntax or meanings, hold the poem together and create its effect.

Tape recorders and sound amplifiers made possible many different kinds of simultaneous sounds, and the poets’ techniques ranged from Chopin’s recording, overdubbing, and speed-changing of phonetic sounds, which he called “poetic sound”; to Heidsieck’s taped aural collages joining different voices with nonverbal noises (*poésie action*); to Mac Low’s live performances in which several readers read their parts—or improvised as instructed—simultaneously, sometimes against a background tape of one or more previous performances—and sometimes for over 30 minutes. More recent performances included a simultaneous reading of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” in five different languages and a reading of John Ashbery’s dual-voice poem, “Litany.” The musicians’ various approaches included Reich’s experiments with simultaneously played tape loops of a single phrase, going in and out of phase with each other with rhythmic and melodic effects (*It’s Gonna Rain*, 1965), as well as Gould’s “contrapuntal radio”—as in the opening of a program about living in northern Canada, in which three different voices simultaneously discussed differing viewpoints, alternately dominating and blending, as in a fugue.

Students may enjoy hearing about these precedents in music, art, and poetry, as well as discussing their own experiences with rounds and descants; a few may even become interested in researching “sound” poetry or in experimenting with tape recorders themselves. But most students will enjoy the challenges of reading and writing poems in Fleischman’s form in which some lines appear in the left column only and are read solo; others appear in the right only, also read solo; and some lines appear on the same horizontal line (whether or not the words are identical) and are read simultaneously by both voices. The idea of antiphonal readers taking turns with lines or speaking the same lines together is easy to understand. But the idea of two voices reading *different* words simultaneously takes some getting used to. It requires a new way of listening, a widening of the ears to hear two things at once.

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Above all, reading these poems reinforces the idea of poetry as both oral and aural, something to be spoken and *heard*. So with my writing students of all ages, I first spent a lot of time performing these poems with each group. I would read one column aloud, and they would read the other.

And when it came to their writing two-voice poems, I found that my students, like the earlier poets, approached the project in different ways. For example, in one fourth grade group, some children preferred to write alone, juggling two voices commenting on one subject; of course, when it was time to read the poems aloud, they had to choose partners:

Tarantula

VOICE 1	VOICE 2
Biting Stinging	Biting
Crawling Eight-legged Spider Watch out	Killing Squirming Eight-legged Spider
Tarantula	You're dead Tarantula

—Chris Kabatsi, 4th grade

Others enjoyed working in pairs, with much discussion, instant revision, and informal rehearsal in the process:

Cats

VOICE 1	VOICE 2
Soft PURRRRRR . . .	Soft Bright eyes gleaming in the dark
All you see in the dark are two eyes and white paws	
	A fur ball on a lap, warmer on a rainy day
Leaving little noseprints on the steamy windowpane	
Great companions for bedtime	Great companions for bedtime
	Little fuzzy tails swishing back and forth
Cats are sweet Soft Kitties are the best CATS!	Soft Kitties are the best CATS!

—Suzanna Strasburg & Katie Rollins, 4th grade

And three girls turned their collaboration into a poem for three voices:

Butterflies

VOICE 1	VOICE 2	VOICE 3
Flutter Fly	Flutter	Flutter
	Float	
We glide against the blue sky Fly	We glide against the blue sky	Wings We glide against the blue sky
	Fly	
to a flower and suck the sweet nectar We rest on	to a flower and suck the sweet nectar	Fly to a flower and suck the sweet nectar
	the petals of	
We are red like the heat of a fire Fire Butterflies	We are yellow like the bright sun Sun Butterflies	a beautiful flower We are blue like the glimmering sky Sky Butterflies

—Annie Hurwitz, Sarah Perpich, & Natalie Randolph,
4th grade

In a high school poetry workshop, I was intrigued by the different ways students chose to work. Some pairs shared their individual strengths; the image experts listened to the sound and rhythm experts, and vice versa; and whoever had the best sense of dramatic order decided on the arrangements of the lines. There was even some unusual pairing between students of different grade levels who shared the same sense of humor, writing about “dung beetles frolicking” or squashed frogs—poems that surprised and amused the class. Other pairs played with language and literary reference:

Two Voices of Shakespeare

VOICE 1	VOICE 2
If music be	
play on	the food of love
Give me excess of it	play on
The appetite may sicken and so die	That a woman conceived me
	I give her most humble thanks
a bachelor?	but I will live a bachelor!
How quick and fresh art thou	Ere you die I shall not
O spirit of love	look pale with love.
eyes	Pick out mine
	with a
ballad maker's	

brothel house? music food of love.	pen and hang me up at the door of a or the sign of blind Cupid.
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—Navin Kumar & Misha Schmilovich, 12th grade

Most, however, preferred to work alone and explore the way this form could present opposing, or at least contrasting, points of view simultaneously.

Chill

VOICE 1

I see the way you look at me

But nervous.
You see me
Learning eagerly

Experiencing

Exploding
with so many new
emotions

. . . out of control?
I see why you say
I'm
growing up too fast.
But Papa—
You taught me to be ambitious.

—Michelle Sachs, 11th grade

My adult university students explored the most challenging aspects of the form, such as whether or not there should be rhythm, rhyme, or both. When and why should the two voices speak the same words? When and why should simultaneous words be different? We did not arrive at any consensus about these questions, nor should we have. Each student dealt with them individually.

Christmas Poem

VOICE 1

Crystal
Frozen
Snowflakes
Gentle sleep.
Child's
Gift-wrapped

VOICE 2

Christmas
Fleece
Spinning
Gentle sleep.
Harvest

Prying Smiles captured. Turkey Sacred Let no man hunger, Let no man lament.	Rapture Pictures Smiles captured. Trimmings Scents Let no man hunger, Let no man lament.
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—David Fulcher

Figure and Ground

VOICE 1

She is
white,
glowing

masses

of untangled hair,
of simple history

her mane and tail.
Seafoam

about her hooves;

moonlight
rests on her
fine flank;
soon,
frogs and sparrows
sing;

and
she disappears,

VOICE 2

Forest
green,

fern

growing

her background,
her home.
Mayapple
clusters

near her
soon,

birds call;
frogs and sparrows
sing;
wake up;
day comes green;
growing,

forest hides her.

—Jim Jett

Another challenge, suggested by my students, was that of writing a dual poem so that each column would hang together on its own, and when read together the two columns would still form a meaningful poem.

Leaves

VOICE 1

Colorful
tree's summer wardrobe

clinging

Breezes blow
twirl us around

VOICE 2

Colorful
tree's
autumn harvest

falling.
Breezes blow
twirl us around

dancing

Rain quenches thirst
shower's refreshing.

Branches fall
blanketed ground.
Silent

rest

down
to the ground.
Rain

soaks our fabric
for slipping.
Branches left bare

Silent
winter
rest.

—Mary Lacina

When I sought my university students' reactions to this particular assignment, they were quick to say, "This one was hard!" because it encouraged succinctness to the point that they felt they had not "written enough." But they went on to say that they enjoyed juggling two viewpoints as well as the challenge of writing the poem such that each column could be read independently and then together—"a bit like working a crossword puzzle." They also felt that this form helps images to stand by themselves, as well as function in the poem as a whole. Above all, they valued the variety of ways that the two voices could play against one another to make the poem an

experience in sound effects separate from meaning, as an expansion of meaning, as direct communication.

FURTHER READING

Barr, Alfred H., Jr., ed. *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968.

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Kostelanetz, Richard. *The Old Poetries and the New*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1981.

Motherwell, Robert, ed. *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*. New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1951.



PLUGS

For the past 8 years, Symphony Space has presented "Selected Shorts," a series of short stories read on stage by professional actors, such as Claire Bloom, Jane Curtin, and Linda Hunt. Many of the programs are aired across the country on National Public Radio. Selected readings are also available on cassette; to date, five volumes, each consisting of two cassettes, have been produced. Volume 5 is devoted to comedy, with stories by Garrison Keillor, Groucho Marx, John Cheever, S.J. Perelman, Anton Chekhov, and others. Each 2-cassette volume sells for \$15.95 plus \$2.50 shipping. For more information, contact Shorts on Cassette, Dept. S, Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway, New York, NY 10025, (212) 864-1414.

Teaching Children to Write Poetry is an engaging 25-minute color film that gives teachers and parents an idea of what teaching poetry writing entails. The film, which comes with a study guide, shows veteran poet/teacher Michael Rutherford working with students in public school classrooms. Available for rental (\$50) or purchase (1/2" VHS, \$250; 16 mm film, \$495), from Edwards Films, Inc., Center Road, Eagle Bridge, NY 12057, (518) 677-5720.

The Literacy Volunteers of New York City not only sponsor literacy programs, they also publish attractive and inexpensive (\$3.50) books for people who are learning to read: the Writers' Voices series consists of high-interest, easy-to-read selections from well-known authors; the New Writers' Voices books are by adult literacy students themselves. Also available is their manual, *How to Start an Effective Adult Literacy Program* (\$12.95). For a catalogue, contact the Publications Dept., Literacy Volunteers of New York City, 121 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013, (212) 925-3209.

Naropa Institute is offering selections from its 200 recordings of the readings and talks that have taken place there since 1974. The selections include readings by Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, John Ashbery, Ted Berrigan, Philip Whalen, Kenward Elmslie, Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer, Robert Creeley, Clark Coolidge, and Anselm Hollo. For more information, contact the Naropa Institute Archives Project, c/o The Naropa Institute Library, 2130 Arapahoe Ave., Boulder, CO 80302, (303) 444-0202.