



Looking Inside

Writing Mind Poems

by Peggy Garrison

Mind has form and mind is beautiful.
—Allen Ginsberg

SOMETIMES A LESSON IDEA COMES TO ME spontaneously on my way to school. I'm half a block away; the three-story brick school building looms ahead. I'm all prepared; my lessons have been carefully planned the night before. Maybe my classes will do "colors," maybe "favorite animals," old standbys that I'm a little tired of—and suddenly my energy drains. I just don't feel like doing what I'd planned.

I'm always interested in coming up with new ways that students can write about themselves. In this instance I was curious to know how my students in grades 3–8 might describe their minds—not in that cortex/medulla biological way, but imaginatively. They couldn't literally see what was inside but perhaps they could present what was in there, "poetically." In my introductory lesson I'd talked about how imaginations are like snowflakes and how

remarkable it is that there are no two alike, so the students were already familiar with the idea of viewing their minds as special and individual.

To introduce the exercise, I first wrote LOOKING INSIDE on the board. This aroused their curiosity and got them focused. To get them into the spirit of the lesson, I then proposed some questions, interspersed with a few of my own examples.

"If I were to go inside your mind, what would I find? I don't want a scientific description of your brain. I want to know things like: What could you compare your mind to? What's its special shape? My mind might be shaped like a book because I'm a writer, or a castanet because I love

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Spanish dancing. Is there a particular color in there? What makes your mind work? Chocolate creams make my mind work. Is there a special memory in there? I remember picking grapefruits off a tree in California with my grandfather. How about a recurring dream? Is there something your mind would like to forget? Mine would like to forget getting my ankle caught in the spokes of a bicycle when I was five. What does your mind like to think about? How do you feel about your mind?"

Whenever I try a new lesson idea, I feel a mixture of excitement and apprehension. No matter how stunning my presentation may have been, I know that the proof is in the writing. What seemed like a great idea can flop. An idea I felt unsure about can blossom.

Just before the students started writing, I put the questions from my verbal presentation on the board. Although both teachers and students prefer that this, I'm always afraid it will be too inhibiting. Of course, I always tell the students that these are suggestions, that they can reverse the order, select a few to expand upon, or disregard all of them and develop their poems any way they want. For this exercise I've found that many students prefer to work closely within the proposed structure. I'm continually amazed that even though they write within this framework, their responses are so individual and varied:

The Mind

My mind is like a wheel
always filled with air that
never catches a flat.
Its color is green
like a leaf.
Video games make it work.
It remembers when I went to Indiana.
It likes to think about space.
I think my mind is out of this world.

—*Vincent Parrales, 5th grade*

My Mind

My mind is blue as a pool,
you could see right through my mind.
My mind is like a key—
it opens doors to any place I want.
My mind is controlled by me.
Nobody can control my mind but me.
My mind floats from side to side
but when I get an idea
lightning shoots out.

—*Wilfredo Ortiz, 6th grade*

Looking Inside

My mind is like a new blouse
with paint on it.
It's shaped like a sharpener.
Its color is paper blue because I

like that color better than anything
in the world.
It likes to think about new dances and songs.
My special memory is when I had a surprise birthday party.
I feel that my mind is my best friend.

—*Tameka Roberson, 4th grade*

My Mind

My mind is like
a never ending ride on the
Gravitron—it's dizzying.
Its color is very,
very blue.
It is shaped like
a fist punching a
punching bag.
It likes to
think about life
after death.
It runs by
gear wheels.
It remembers when it
got sick from eating
too much ice cream.
It would like to forget
falling off the kitchen
counter.
I think my
mind is very weird.

—*Jonathan Valarezo, 5th grade*

There were also some striking examples by students who chose to depart from the proposed framework. Arnell Milton combined rap with stream-of-consciousness:

Writing about Who I Am

My mind is nice just like Glenn Rice
and shaped like a basket while
I watch my show Monday nights
all the time with a slam or a jammer
just like MC Hammer.
The color of my mind is fine
like an orange and strange and
my jumpshot has range just like Danny Ainge.
I remember Starks for three and
the Knicks get down with KKKIIIIINGGGG!
'Cause I am what I am 'cause that's all
that I am, 'cause I'm Popeye
the Dr. Slammer Jammer Man.

—*Arnell Milton, 6th grade*

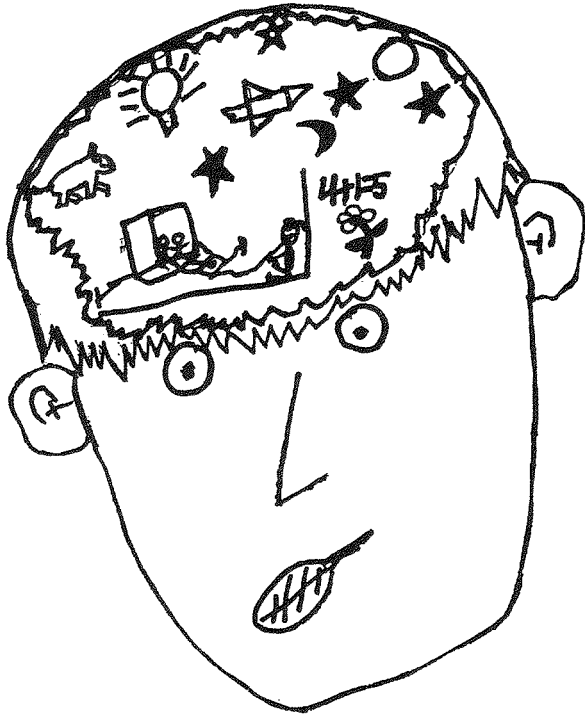
Todd Honig developed a list of comparisons:

My Mind

My mind is like a book that never closes
My mind is like a pencil that never stops writing
My mind is like a light that is never turned off
My mind is like a lost soul that never stops wandering
My mind is like a stream that never ends

My mind is like a curious person that never stops wondering
My mind is like a puzzle that has millions of pieces
My mind is like a picture that has many different shapes.

—Todd Honig, 5th grade



The mind-poem configuration seemed to give students a form to express painful images that might otherwise have been too overwhelming to write about. The list of things their minds wanted to forget included: “when my parents got divorced”; “the day my grandfather died”; “the fight I had with my little cousin”; “breaking my finger”; “the day when I was three and fell down a flight of stairs”; “the day my hamster died”; and “when I almost drowned but my dad saved me.”

This form also offered students a way to praise themselves. Phrases like “My mind is my best friend,” “I think my mind is out of this world,” and “My mind is great!” might have made students feel too self-conscious if they’d been writing about themselves more directly.

One student wove happy and painful images:

My mind is like a color TV and helps me
picture many pictures. My mind remembers
good things like the first time I went skiing.
My mind likes to forget when my aunt died.
When I remember that, it makes me want
to cry. I also don’t like to remember
when I broke my arm and I hope for a
few years I don’t have any harm. My mind
is great!

—Rhonda Weissman, 3rd grade

With the eighth graders, in addition to the verbal presentation I used in the younger students, I listed some common expressions with the word *mind* in them: I’m losing my mind; I have half a mind to...; ...comes to mind; mindless; I’ll give you a piece of my mind; a mind is a terrible thing to waste. The students seemed to enjoy talking about this list, closely examining expressions they’d previously taken for granted.

I then read them the following two poems by adult poets:

Revival

Snow is a mind
falling, a continuous breath
of climbs, loops, spirals,
dips into the earth
like white fireflies
wanting to land, finding
a wind between houses,
diving like moths
into their own light
so that one wonders if snow is a wing’s
long memory across winter.

—Steve Crow

In back of the real

railroad yard in San Jose
I wandered desolate
in front of a tank factory
and sat on a bench
near the switchman’s shack.

A flower lay on the hay on
the asphalt highway
the dread hay flower
I thought—it had a
brittle black stem and
corolla of yellowish dirty
spikes like Jesus’ inchlong
crown, and a soiled
dry center cotton tuft
like a used shaving brush
that’s been lying under the garage for a year.

Yellow, yellow flower, and
flower of industry,
tough spikey ugly flower,
flower nonetheless,
with the form of the great yellow
Rose in your brain!
This is the flower of the World.

—Allen Ginsberg

The eighth grade poems were less spontaneous but more philosophical and complex than those by the younger students. Some eighth graders explored how their

minds could hold contradictory images. Others wrote interesting spin-offs from the sample poems.

My mind is a shallow hole waiting to be filled with good things but there is always room for bad, only a little room.
My mind is mixed of two colors. One color is white. It helps my mind think of purity and love and then there is black that holds darkness and my sadness. When these two mix, the color is no longer two, it's one; that one color is gray where all my feelings and thoughts lie.

—Theresa Whitemar, 8th grade

My mind is the shade of black
not a color
only a state of mind.
My mind often forgets it's a brain
and falls deep in love with emotions
and no thoughts.
I love my mind.
That's all I have.
My mind is like crops that never stop growing.

Its color is black.
It dreams of being colorful.
I am my mind and my mind is me.
I think my mind is colorful
but my mind
does not.

—Reyna Richman, 8th grade

The mind-poem exercise has turned out to be one of my most successful lessons. The students expressed themselves with imaginative openness and imagery that is individual and specific. When I asked a class of fifth graders why they thought this lesson worked so well, one of them said, “This assignment gets children to talk about themselves and to share about themselves in ways they won’t feel embarrassed about.” Another said, “Your mind is your own and only yours. It gives you a chance to focus on something that’s only yours.”



Letter to T&W

Dear T&W,

I thought you’d like to hear about the activities that my colleagues and I organized for National Poetry Month. Enclosed is a feature story that appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* about poetry at Sigel School in St. Louis. The story came out three days before our Poetry Festival.

I had gotten in touch with poet-teacher Dave Morice, and we used one of the ideas in his *Adventures of Dr. Alphabet*, the Poetry Grab Bag. It was one of seven stations out on the school playground:

- A “rap” corner with old pots and pans and plastic containers for percussion.
- A sidewalk chalk area to write poems on the blacktop.
- A table with Styrofoam cups, beans, paper towels, and ballpoint pens: the kids received instructions on how to grow a bean plant in the cup, then wrote poems around the cup.
- A table with posterboard pins: the kids wrote short poems or phrases on the pins, then moved them around
- Poetry Grab Bag: each child received a brown lunch bag with a word and a picture cut from a magazine, a sticker depicting one of the five senses, and a small plastic toy animal, as well as a colored index card and a library pencil to write a poem about all these things.

• The Wall of Wishes, Lies, and Dreams, where markers were provided at the foot of a wall we’d covered with white paper, inviting poems.

• A Balloon Table. Each child wrote a short poem on one side of a piece of paper. On the other side was a printed message to the finder, asking for him or her to send a bit of poetry back to Sigel School. Later we released helium balloons with the poems and messages inside. A few days later we received a poem from a family in a small town nine miles from St. Louis, in Illinois!

The highlight of the festival was the “wrapping” of the school principal. Every child, teacher, and staff member of the school contributed a line of poetry to adding machine tape. We spliced it together (it was *very* long) and had some kids wrap Dr. Arbini, who was an excellent sport about it. The next day the *Post-Dispatch* ran a photo of him all wrapped up.

We also held a Poetry Assembly in which some published poems were recited, but most of the presentations were of original class collaborations.

Warmly,
Mary Wertsch

Word into Idea

The Four-Column Association and the Placket

by Steve Fried

MOST EXPOSITORY WRITING AND MUCH “creative” writing moves from idea to word. But one type of literary work moves in the opposite direction: it establishes a “machine” that generates words and word juxtapositions as a way of getting to surprising connections of great associative richness and evocative power, as in André Breton’s automatic writing or William Burroughs’ cut-up techniques. From such work, students can learn uses of non-semantic and nonlinear organizing devices such as rhyme and association, and can start to use sound and intuitive verbal connections to locate new paths of meaningfulness. Words become the atoms of an organic literary chemistry, and their “polymerization” into stanzas and paragraphs becomes a wonderfully satisfying experience of art making something out of nothing.

In practical terms, the task for the teacher is twofold: to discover or invent the “machine” itself and to present it to students accessibly and interestingly. Two of my own “old faithful” exercises involve such devices. They have never failed to produce writing both startling to each creator and fascinating to others for its similarities to and differences from their own creations using the same principles.

The first exercise, the four-column association, produces a free-form paragraph or poem following a five-to ten-minute freewriting warmup. With younger students, you can simplify the forms from four to two columns.

The Four-Column Association

After some freewriting or other loosening-up exercise, I give my students the following instructions:

1. Fold a blank piece of lined paper vertically into four equal columns.
2. Number the columns at the top, 1–4.
3. Put your initials next to the number 1.
4. Now put your papers down.

Next I ask each student, “What’s your favorite letter of

the alphabet?” As they tell me, I write these letters on the board in a vertical column. Then I continue:

5. Write this column of letters down the extreme left of column #1 on your papers.

6. Now write a word in each line of column #1, being careful not to go over the fold to column #2. The word may begin with the letter you’ve written, but it doesn’t have to. You may use any words: stay loose and don’t censor.

7. When everyone’s finished with column #1, pass the paper to the person on your right. First, count to make sure you have the number of words corresponding to the number of letters we began with (the number of people doing the exercise).

8. Now put your initials at the top of the empty column #2, on the paper you just got.

9. In column #2, write a word for each word in column #1, whatever comes into your mind when you see the word. Let your imagination do the work.

10. When everyone’s done, fold over column #1 so it can’t be seen, and pass your finished column #2 to the person on your right.

11. Put your initials in column #3 of the new paper you’ve received, and fill in words there by the same process you just used with columns #1 and #2.

12. Fold over column #2 when finished and pass your finished column #3 and blank column #4 to the person on your right.

13. Put your initials at the top of the blank column #4 you’ve received and fill it in as before.

14. Now that we’ve finished, let’s pick three or four lines each to read aloud.

15. Now tear the paper into four vertical columns along the folds, and give everyone back the four columns that he or she wrote.

16. Put your columns in order and look at what you’ve written. This is all yours. Read aloud any interesting series of four.

17. Using your own words, you’re going to write a paragraph, according to these rules:

- a) Use all your words, each at least once.
- b) Use them in sentences, without worrying too much about “sense” or “meaning.”

STEVE FRIED is a poet who teaches at CSI/CUNY and the Local 1199 of the Hospital Workers’ Union. Forthcoming is his *Collected Plackets 1984–1996* from Juxta Press, 977 Seminole Trail, #331, Charlottesville, VA 22901.

- c) Make the title of the paragraph be the fourteenth word in column #3.
 - d) Make the first word in the paragraph be the tenth word in column #2.
 - e) Make the last word in the paragraph be the second word in column #4.
- (N.B.: c, d, and e are arbitrary designations.)
- f) Use as few other words as possible to connect your words, though you may employ simple connectives as necessary.
 - g) It's helpful to cross out words with a single stroke as you use them.
- Any questions? Write 20–30 minutes.

Students then read their pieces aloud. After each one, the listeners have a minute or two to write comments on what they were most struck by, what stayed in their minds from it. After all the papers have been read, each student gets to hear what the class wrote about his or her piece. This is followed by a freewriting on the exercise for three to five minutes and a reading and discussion of the freewriting.

Here is an example of a three-column association:

Musical

Life stinks! Denise loves nightmares! The poor doctor seems lonely. Long vacations, inept love life. The Bruce Lee novel, flattering morons...fail to make her happy.

Tigers, Zombies, Xerox machine, Queen Betty the bitch, Kraft cheese, Santa—all music when awake but something weird when in bed asleep. Jesus! Nowhere but in bed!

Look! Mom works from dawn! Happily waiting, betting that some small confidence would mix merrily with the dreams and the smoke that clouds the sleep would quit like fish jogging out of live coals.

Drake the maniac abuses the truth; says life is a bitch and coke the king. Good books, loud laughter, red apples...fail to lift his spirits. This sad man eats broccoli, gives blank and obnoxious looks, stuffs glue all about the chair, spends more time in the zoo, sings and jumps with birds and drinks barley water.

All ends when light invades darkness and day begins.

—C.D., 11th grade

Some two-column associations:

light is darker than lights
 paper is whiter than papers
 an apple is sweeter than apples
 the queen is higher than queens
 the king thinks so
 the violin sounds sweeter
 than violins

—J.F., 4th grade

The Quack Master

I jumped all day today
 Popeye grewed a tree
 Seeds was in an apple
 The duck quack is
 the master
 The second master gets
 to get a kite
 Strings got caught
 into a violet

—E.M., 3rd grade

The Placket

“Placket” is a term I coined to describe a poem that has a set of initial, internal, and end rhymes and whose structure resembles that of Welsh and Hebrew poems, such as those that influenced Dylan Thomas’s “If I were tickled by the rub of love,” and W. H. Auden’s “Warm are the still and lucky miles.” Based on neither accentual nor syllabic units, the placket’s lines are determined by word count, making it a sort of rhymed free verse. Much of the placket’s linguistic energy comes from the disjunction between line ends and line beginnings, which are determined by chance. At first, the tendency is to strive for end-stopped lines; however, this caution is soon replaced by recognition that enjambments often suggest original and evocative associations. Additionally, the placket requires the author to create surprising semantic “bridges,” which is the chief virtue of the form, as well as its joy.

The form and instructions are set up on blank templates (see pp. 7 and 8). I include three possibilities: a 2x3 rhyme form for primary grades, a 3x3 for intermediate school, and a 5x5 for older and more skilled participants. You can design your own, but be sure to write a few poems with it to see how it sounds and what’s easy and hard in it.

It’s best to give out the top of the blank template first, with only the initial rhyme lists. When the lists have been completed, hand out the instructions for parts two and three.

Here are some examples, beginning with a 5x5 placket:

Children in the Neighborhood

Flippy clip stepping sleep so much crunch
 Sunny Tommy funny Jimmy running
 Carrot fresh sound, good flap
 Johnny laughs, Steve giggles, the girls are jumping
 Crisp shirt handsome man clap
 Talking, eating, pound round Bunny
 Cookie Monster lose weight, step

Honey silent keep on packing
 Tap the box bound the sox creamy
 Wound healed Danny Kicking joy
 found
 —M.P., 11th grade

Here are two 3x3 plackets:

Mudcat

I love playing in mud
 because it goes THUD! My cat
 isn't allowed on the bed
 before she gets fed. A flood
 of meows sounds like bats
 where she sat and won't be led.
 —N.W., 6th grade

"Hello," I said to the mime,
 "do you have the time?" He tripped
 and fell and as thin
 as he was he couldn't win and I slimed
 him and he gripped
 and he slipped and I grinned.
 —D.F., 5th grade

The following are 2x3 plackets:

School is where you learn.
 The tiny germ cost a dime.
 Hurry up, Prime, my perm
 is getting lost in Time.
 —C.B., 6th grade

I have a big bun.
 "I can run, I can!
 I had run," said Sun,
 "I caught a big tan!"
 —J.A., 5th grade

I have a good class.
 I broke a glass on the fox.
 The big box filled fast.
 I have red and blue socks.
 —N.B., 4th grade

I send a ring toy
 I seen a boy—my friend
 I have a blend and I find joy
 I do have something to send
 —L.C., 4th grade

When the blue people come
 They are from the brain
 Family. The crane wants some.
 They're not crazy, they're sane.
 —K.R., 4th grade

HOW TO WRITE A 2x3 PLACKET

I. Under each letter below, write three words that rhyme with each other:

| | | |
|---|-------|-------|
| | A | B |
| 1 | _____ | _____ |
| 2 | _____ | _____ |
| 3 | _____ | _____ |

II. Now move those words to their addresses below. For example, the first word under "A" goes at the end of the first line.

| | | |
|-------|-------|----|
| _____ | _____ | A1 |
| _____ | A2 | B1 |
| _____ | B2 | A3 |
| _____ | _____ | B3 |

III. To finish the poem, fill in the other blanks with any words you choose. Don't worry about making sense. Use words you like and that sound good to you.

HOW TO WRITE A 3x3 PLACKET

I. Under each letter below, write three words that rhyme with each other:

| | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| | A | B | C |
| 1 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3 | _____ | _____ | _____ |

II. Now move those words to their addresses below. For example, the first word under "A" above (A1) goes at the end of the first line below.

| | | |
|-------|-------|----|
| _____ | _____ | A1 |
| _____ | A2 | B1 |
| _____ | _____ | C1 |
| _____ | C2 | A3 |
| _____ | _____ | B2 |
| _____ | B3 | C3 |

III. To finish the poem, fill in the other blanks above with any words you choose. Don't worry about making sense. Just use words that you like and that sound good to you.

HOW TO WRITE A 5x5 PLACKET

I. Under each letter, write five words that rhyme with each other:

| | A | B | C | D | E |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

II. Now copy the words by letter and number below. For example, the first word under "C" goes at the end of the first line.

| | | | | | | |
|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| A1 | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | C1 | _____ |
| B1 | _____ | _____ | _____ | D1 | _____ | _____ |
| C2 | _____ | E1 | _____ | A2 | _____ | _____ |
| B2 | _____ | _____ | _____ | D2 | _____ | _____ |
| C3 | _____ | _____ | A3 | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| D3 | _____ | E2 | _____ | B3 | _____ | _____ |
| C4 | _____ | _____ | _____ | A4 | _____ | _____ |
| B4 | _____ | _____ | _____ | D4 | _____ | _____ |
| A5 | _____ | E3 | _____ | C5 | _____ | _____ |
| E4 | _____ | B5 | D5 | _____ | E5 | _____ |

III. To finish the poem, fill in the other blanks with any words you want. Don't worry about making sense. Use words you like and that sound good to you.

Sick

Last summer my sister had
chickenpox and got mad. I laughed,
and the cat bit my calf. I'm glad
she's six and I'm nine and a half.

—D.K., 4th grade



Leaves and Foxes

Using Hyperbole and Paradox in Poetry

by Phillip DePoy

THIS THREE-PART EXERCISE DEALS WITH poetic excess: heightened exaggeration of deliberately conflicting ideas. In many students' minds, paradox is quite a bit like juxtaposition, and hyperbole is suspiciously like lying. William Saroyan's Armenian uncle once asked Saroyan what he did for a living. Saroyan said, "I tell lies." The uncle nodded, "I understand there is much call for that sort of thing in America." Much art may be artifice, but that doesn't mean it's not true. Sometimes a circumstance calls for exaggeration just to convey a true sentiment. I always tell my writing students that a phrase like "I'll love you until the end of time" is ordinarily hyperbole, but when I say it to my wife, it's a statement of fact.

While most students have no trouble understanding hyperbole, many seem to have more trouble with the concept of paradox. They find it difficult to believe that two things that are mutually exclusive could, nevertheless, be true. I sometimes ask students if they've ever found it possible to hate somebody they loved. With some students, though, it may be better to avoid emotional issues. If this is the case, I like to give them an example from subatomic physics instead.

The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle is itself a great paradox. Simply stated, it goes something like, "It's impossible to know both a particle's exact position and its momentum *at the same time*." We can measure the position, or the momentum, but not both simultaneously because, despite appearances to the contrary, reality doesn't work that way. Reality doesn't exist at all the way we think it does. The particle is always still and always moving. (Since this is a problem I've worried about for a great many years, I suppose I can understand why many students have some difficulty understanding paradox.)

Part One of this exercise involves deliberate exaggeration: hyperbole. This exaggeration can be operatic, mythic, or everyday. I generally discuss the kind of lies lovers tell, the mythic nature of our heroes, and the ordinary conversation of all fishermen describing the 20-pound bass that got away. Everyone has, at some time and however innocently, told a lie. This exercise is a practice in telling the kinds of beautiful and wild lies we find in poems.

Joy

One day I was so happy
that I grew big enough
to cover the world around
I held my breath so long
I turned into the blue of the sky
I was so big
that I ate the sun for breakfast.

—Sean Seymour, 3rd grade

I told Sean about the Chief in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* who felt small when he was depressed and thought he actually grew big when his joy and freedom increased.

Heart

I saw him
and I was so scared
my heart jumped out out my mouth
and I woke up
in Heaven

—India Cross, 3rd grade

India wrote this poem about a boy she liked. When I read it to the class, some of the students thought the poem was about love, but others found it a great expression of fear: literally being scared to death. India herself was disappointed that her point had not been clear. I reminded her of what I'd said earlier: poems mean different things to different people. Robert Frost, for example, always insisted that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" was only about a sleigh ride.

The Flood Cloud

It was flooding so hard
it was filling the ditch.
It was fast as a jet,
it was big as a house.
It was black as the Universe,

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higher than night,
but at last when it moved
it let in the light.

—Layman Summers, 3rd grade

In south Georgia, a flood can be a terrible thing, and farms can be wiped away. This poem, even in a third grade class, met with solemn nodding all around. They all knew that Layman, their classmate, had been in such a flood. The fact that the poem ends in light struck me as a remarkable statement of optimism, given that the flood had badly damaged Layman's home. After class, Layman stuck around to talk to me: "Mr. DePoy, you know how you said about your wife at the beginning of class? Well, to most people this poem would be a lie, but to me it's a fact."

Part Two is a brief exploration of paradox. In many kinds of non-Western education (Zen, Taoism, Tantra), a teacher will deliberately introduce paradoxical ideas, even to very young students, with the express purpose of breaking the students from a habit of linear thinking, to shake them out of it. Since an aim of poetry is to break ordinary thought patterns, a working knowledge of paradox would seem primary to the poet.

Because it is difficult to communicate a non-linear concept in linear terms, a better way to present paradox to students is by example. Emily Dickinson's line (from "My Life Closed Twice") serves: "Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell." After reading this poem to students, I ask them how parting from a loved one could be both heaven and hell.

The exercise of creating a paradox in words is something like an exercise of creating an image out of juxtaposition. The poet simply places two things together that can't both be true, or at least don't belong together. I suggest that the students try to write two conflicting things about some larger issue—life, love, death—that are both true.

Leaves and Foxes

The terror was irresistible, the love was repellent.
A little rain means nothing to the sea,
but our little fish pond would die without it.
Some fish cannot tell the difference
between leaves falling and a fox hunting.
I cannot tell the difference
between love's feeling and a false heart.

This poem, by 53-year-old Leda Williams, introduces a paradox in the first two lines: something that should be repellent is attractive, something that should attract, instead, terrifies. There is also a paradox in the rain meaning both nothing and everything, depending on its situation. The last four lines of the poem remain mysterious, and yet somehow familiar and true—which is, I suppose, itself a paradox.

A Post-Death Vacation

After death, in Florida,
the babies grew up
to be green light switches.

—Shelby McCoy, 10th grade

Believe it or not, this very odd poem was inspired by John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud." Shelby quoted to me the lines, "One short sleep passed, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more...." When I asked her where the "green light switches" had come from, she only laughed.

Darker Hours

A life is dragged to eternal death.

Darker hours have spoken
to the winding glass of time.

Souls are weeping as one
stranded on the rope.

Eyes like flaming fields
watch as figures are pierced.
They tear at the hearts of dead men
who believe that life is given.

Water drips on the faces of the bizarre.
Children peel the skin of their forefathers.
Stretched to its limit, a serpent calls all to order,
flaming chants as each is reborn:

No more time to love
in the paradox of war.

This poem is by Tarra Dean, a 16-year-old student (and peace activist) from Appalachia. To her, as to many young students, paradox is unacceptable if it comes in the form of being taught one thing and then being told to do something else. They cannot stand anything they perceive as hypocrisy. She told me her father had been a Sunday School teacher in their church before he had been drafted to go to Vietnam. She wanted to know how people who called themselves Christians could go to war, and send other people to war. She had extremely devout and personal religious beliefs that I feel could one day answer her questions, where I could not.

Part Three attempts to combine hyperbole and paradox in a single poem in order to achieve a startling or unusual idea, image, or tone. Students should try to start the poem with a paradox, and then use hyperbole to heighten the paradox, within a ten-line poem. (For some reason, experience has proved that this arbitrary line limit is ultimately more freeing than confining. It's impossible to build any structure without a definite foundation, especially a structure of wild fancy.)

Often hyperbole is metaphorical, and the students naturally turn to metaphor to accomplish this task.

Imagery also plays an important part in establishing odd hyperbole. In other words, even without trying to, the poet may combine much of what he or she has learned previously in this final part of the exercise.

And it may be that a group of poems need to be written to fulfill the demands of this exercise—a single poem seems too lonely.

Fish like a Forest

Fish like a forest swim
lifelessly into roots
in the soul of time.

Deeper they descend
drowning death itself
in a force so strong
it does not exist.

—Miyoshi West

Miyoshi wrote this at age 15. Note the use of the paradoxical notions of swimming lifelessly and drowning death, and the hyperbolic paradox of a force so strong that it doesn't exist. I also find quite remarkable the alliteration, juxtaposition, odd imagery, and mood created by these words. All this, and I have no idea—at least on a conscious level—what the *words* mean.

Frog Ears

Bouncing in the black snow
dancing in the musical twilight
naked eye
in the morning
of a white afternoon
so light
not even frog ears
can hear my feet fall
as I dance
in the snow.

Michele Franklin's hyperbole ("so light / not even frog ears / can hear my feet fall") is so strange, that I urged her to use it as the title. Snow could look black at twilight, giving the poem a very believable paradox. Michele also explained to me that she slept until afternoon whenever she could. On such occasions, afternoon *was* her morning.

Turtle

Like a sea turtle
my thought is on the ocean, riding the wave
that is a tear in her eye.
Like a turtledove
my mind is in the evening
riding the air
that is the breaking of her sigh.
She is far from me tonight
but I am close to her.

This poem was written by an army colonel in an evening adult class I taught in Atlanta. The paradox *is* the hyperbole in most cases. Her tear is as big as the ocean. Her sigh is all the air at night. The paradox of being far away from someone to whom he felt close is one this man understood very well. Because of his occupation, he had been away from his wife on many occasions. Everyone in the class was moved by this poem. After the colonel read the poem, he told us, "Nothing invites poetry into a man's soul like a life in the military. I've been very good friends with dozens of men I've watched die. I've seen whole towns blow up in seconds. I've seen human beings on fire. I started writing to keep from losing my mind, and...so far, it's worked."

People write poems for exactly as many reasons as there are people who write poems. Here we have the paradox of a man, whose life is spent helping to make war, writing a poem about doves and loving his wife and the metaphysics of distance.



Other National Poetry Month Activities

- Read and write poetry with your students.
- Bring your favorite poems to class and read them aloud and talk about them.
- Publish your students' poetry in their own books, a school anthology, a school literary magazine, the local newspaper, or the school web site.
- Have your students make poetry cassettes for their friends and families.
- Encourage colleagues and parents to add a short poem to the message on their phone answering machines.
- Set up poetry displays in class, the hallway, and the library.
- Get local bookstores and public libraries to feature poetry books and to host readings.
- Invite a poet to your school for workshops, talks, readings, etc.
- Play poetry audiocassettes and poetry videos for your students.
- Ambitious? Organize a poetry festival.
- Arrange volunteer poetry workshops in senior centers, recreation programs, civic groups, and social agencies.
- Outside of school, meet with your colleagues and friends to read poetry aloud and talk about it. With food and drink.
- Ask your local newspaper to write about your activities during National Poetry Month.
- Coordinate Poetry Month activities with your state or local arts council.

Poetry Activities

Good for National Poetry Month

by Janet Matthews, Anne Wessel, & Mary Jane Peterson

From 1993 to 1996, a group of high school English teachers from the New York City area met twice a year with the poet C. K. Williams and five T&W poets to discuss new ways to teach poetry. The project was sponsored by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The following are a few of the strategies that emerged from the sessions.—Ed.

The Sneak Attack and Other Devious Tactics

Sometimes the initiation into a poetry unit is a nightmarish prospect for students. Moans of protestation resound throughout the classroom. I have uncovered three insidious methods that soften the incorrigible and break the resistance of first-day poetry fright:

1. For the lack of a pedagogical term, I call the first method the "Sneak Attack." Without notice, I lead students from the classroom to the library. I tell them that they are going on a secret mission. When they arrive in the library, they receive an envelope with the following instructions:

Hello,

Your headquarters is Table One. The other three people sitting at your table are spies. Please do not converse with them. They will try to get you to reveal your mission. Be careful. In the center of your table, you will find a stack of stolen documents [about ten poetry books, placed on the table by the librarian beforehand]. You have only 30 minutes to complete your mission. Read these directions carefully:

1. Find the shortest poem you like. Please copy it on your envelope exactly the way it is presented. Be very careful with the spacing. We will figure out what is behind the invisible ink tomorrow. Please scramble the author's name. We must take all precautions to guard secrecy.

2. Poets are very sneaky about hidden messages. Find a poem that you like but that you don't understand. Tomorrow we will break the code. Either photocopy or copy the poem. Please place a big question mark on the back of this paper.

3. The final part of your mission is to find and read a poem about either water, animal/nature, or a person that you think someone in your squad (class) will like. Your identity is not to be revealed. Please photocopy

the poem. On the back of the paper, write the name of the person for whom your poem is intended, and enter the codeword that corresponds to your topic:

| TOPIC | CODE WORD |
|---------------|------------|
| water | hydrogen |
| animal/nature | fauna |
| person | anthropoid |

When the bell rings, quietly place your envelopes and photocopies in the suitcase on the table. I will guard this evidence overnight and bring it to class tomorrow for debriefing.

Mission accomplished! The incorrigible have actually touched and read poetry without suffering the anticipated wounds. In addition, you have an entry point into the next lesson.

The next day, I usually start my debriefing by opening the suitcase full of envelopes. Students randomly select one envelope, read it, and outline the shape of the poem. This gentle springboard gets students reading, and shows how writers use white space and line length to pace the reading of the poem and to aid understanding. As with secret valentines, students are fascinated as to why someone would select a particular poem for them, and who sent it.

2. A more sophisticated approach begins with the reading of a cento, a poem composed of lines by other poets. I give students a picture and ask them to compose a cento about it. How insidious! Before students can compose a cento, they must read, read, read poetry in order to find appropriate lines. Off my students go—this time not to the library, but to the computer lab to search through *The Columbia Granger's World of Poetry*. One student, responding to Hendrick Avercamp's painting *A Winter Scene with Skaters Near a Castle*, read over 60 poems before she came up with the 12 lines she arranged in her "Winter Cento":

The morning breaks,
One must have a mind of winter.
When it comes the landscape listens,
Silent and soft, and slow descends the snow.
In large white flakes falling on the city brown,
Around the house the flakes fly faster.
There is snow in every street,
And frost glitt'ring on the ground.

We shall walk in the snow,
The frolic architecture of the snow,
Of easy wind and downy flake
Snow, snow, and a wintry sky.

—*Kelly Wind*

3. My most devious method is to have students create “readers’ scripts.” The students and I rewrite a poem as a dramatic script for performance. I hope Coleridge will forgive me for what I did to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Against the backdrop of slides of Gustave Doré’s illustrations for the poem, students brought in wedding gifts. When the guests heard “the merry din,” off went the flute. When the “storm-blast came,” so did ripples of recorded thunder. The class shouted, “Ah wretch! The Bird to slay....” Replete with chains and sails, the narrator led the class through the terrifying space of the open sea, through electric-fan windstorms and the cardboard snowflakes of Antarctica. Yes, there was a dice roll, and stuffed snakes, and, as the mariner’s crew, the entire class followed cue cards to stand, sway, and die. But most importantly, the resistant read and remembered the tale of “a sadder and wiser man.”

—JANET MATTHEWS, WESTLAKE HS, THORNWOOD, N.Y.

The Poetry Café

Imagine a room in which cardboard tombstones glow in the light of flickering candles and black crêpe paper winds around tables and chairs. Imagine a room with pages of poetry clothespinned to laundry lines, and students and faculty eagerly awaiting the commencement of another poetry reading with students and teachers as readers. One of my most satisfying experiences as a high school teacher has been the transformation of my classroom into a poetry café, where students and faculty read works by their favorite poets. Equally satisfying was one student’s asking, “I really didn’t understand some of the poems, but can I come again?”

After two years of experimenting, I’ve concluded that students and faculty need opportunities to experience poetry the same way they might experience a concert or a museum. Poetry readings provide the audience with a setting in which they can enjoy sheer language. For students, the readings are “listening trips” or “reading trips.”

If you are thinking about starting poetry readings at your school, the following suggestions may be useful:

- Students need to know it’s okay to read poetry. To infuse a school with poetry requires a community of readers beyond the English classroom, and beyond just honors students. Invite students *and* teachers to be readers. Ask teachers from as many disciplines as possible to model the readings. A variety of voices adds richness. It also creates a risk-free environment for students and lets them know that poems are open to interpretation.

- Set readings around a theme. This immerses the listener in the subject and focuses the audience.

- Sanction the readings with official status by issuing invitations and requesting RSVPs.

- Aim for school-wide publicity; this will help you reach a diverse audience. Engage the help of student organizations and the PTA. Bombard your school with dramatic posters using catchy titles. This lets the school audience know poetry is going public. Students are intrigued to see that their science teacher and friends are featured as readers.

- Notify the local newspaper, and run a feature article in the school paper and district newsletter.

- Provide a program guide and an anthology of the poems to each member of the audience. Some students enjoy following along as they listen. The anthology allows the audience to reread the poems, and can lead them to explore other works by the featured poet(s).

- Initiate each reading with a brief overview of the program, a few words about the poet(s), and a provocative question for the audience to think about. It’s also good to give a short listening prompt before each poem. Announce the page number in the anthology; this cuts down on the rustling of paper.

- Create an ambience that duplicates a coffeehouse setting as closely as possible. Have live music—for example, I’ve used flute and drums to accompany readings of Whitman’s Civil War poetry. The dramatic roll of drums startled the audience when the reader described Whitman’s cavalry skirmishes, and a soft flute set the mood for dirges. Organize chairs and tables informally, and serve light refreshments.

- Simple props can work well also. For example, distribute a packet of sunflower seeds with Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra” or use a rain stick (a wooden seed-filled tube that emits a rain-like sound) during Dickinson’s “A Thunder-Storm.”

- Resist the temptation to discuss the poems. Instead, ask students to identify their favorite poem (and reader). Ask them for suggestions for future readings and readers. This is a great way to encourage students to become readers.

- Try beginning and ending with the same poem. (You will be surprised how students find comfort in the familiar.) Novice listeners respond best to concrete images and experiences they can relate to.

- Forty minutes is an ideal length for readings, with 25 minutes for the actual reading and 15 minutes for refreshments. Build in pauses—students need time to collect their thoughts.

- Use the RSVPs as free raffle tickets and give away a poetry book as a door prize.
- Videotape the readings and build up a lending library for classroom viewing.
- Most important, show your enthusiasm and emotional response. Poetry readings can have a transformational effect on both listeners and readers.

Here are programs of two successful readings:

Emily Dickinson: Secrets from the Portfolio

1) *Poems about life*. “I’m nobody,” “If I can keep one heart,” “Surgeons must be very careful,” “A man,” “Parting,” “Hope,” “The Last Thought.”

2) *Love poems*. “If you were coming in the fall,” “The Wife,” “The Master,” “Love,” “We outgrow love like other things,” “Have you got a brook in your little heart?”

3) *Nature poems*. “The Storm,” “The Moon,” “The Bee.”
NOTES: Use rain sticks for the nature poems. Begin and end with “I’m nobody.” Use echoing voices and rounds.

The Beat Poets

Allen Ginsberg: “A Western Ballad,” “Sunflower Sutra,” “Green Valentine Blues,” “Love Forgiven,” “Psalm III,” “Uptown.”

Michael McClure: “Look at the Gorgeousness,” “Haiku of the Hunt,” “Haikus.”

Gregory Corso: “Hair,” “Sea Chanty,” “Emily Dickinson.”

Lawrence Ferlinghetti: “The pennycandystore beyond the el...,” “Recipe for Happiness,” “Dove sta amore,” “Night Lights.”

NOTES: Plant readers in the audience. Use chimes for “Sea Chanty,” a pile of garbage for “Look at the Gorgeousness,” and jellybeans for “The pennycandystore...” Have a guitarist or pianist accompany Ginsberg’s lyrics. For “Sunflower Sutra,” decorate the room with sunflowers and give the audience packets of sunflower seeds with different lines of the poem attached. Corso’s “Hair” is most effective when read by someone with a receding hairline.

—JANET MATTHEWS, WESTLAKE HS, THORNWOOD, N.Y.

One Way In: Videotaping a Poem

Lively discussion often follows a writing assignment in which I ask students to imagine a poem as a video. I ask them to “watch” the video in their minds and then describe it in writing, keeping the sequence of “frames” the same as in the poem. They can do this either at home or in class. Here is the example poem, followed by a tenth grader’s response:

Heavy Construction

Some nights looking for my father
I’d drive downtown near Wall Street
and double park outside The Market,
Keatons, The Blarney Cafe—my warning
lights flashing—and dig through bankrupt men
wasted from their afternoon cocktails.

One night too late, I found him Mid-town
drinking Manhattans. He insisted
I meet his good friend, the bartender
who poured and stirred and served us
one for the road.

My father, who was as shy with strangers
as he was with his own children,
introduced me that night
as his smart son who quit school
to write poetry and crack cement
with a jackhammer. He handed me
a twenty to drive him home, passed out
before we got there.

Too late to sleep after getting him
inside, I took a shot, showered and drove
back out as the sun was rising.
A new job that day, a new place to break
open the earth, to pull out the dirt,
start over.

—Peter Murphy

1. First, I see a guy driving, looking side to side. He double-parks, puts on his warning lights and gets out of the car. He tries to walk through a bunch of drunk men in order to get inside the bar.

2. He enters the bar and sees his father. He invites him over and introduces him to his best friend, the bartender. As he sits down to have a drink, he’s thinking about what his father said about quitting school to write poetry and about cracking cement.

3. As they are leaving, his father gives him a twenty to drive him home. When they are in the car, the father passes out.

4. When they get to the house, the son carries the father in. He puts him to bed, takes a shot and showers and then drives off as the sun is rising.

—Carl Thompson

Once the writing is completed, we discuss the different texts: the original poem and their “videos.” I ask one or two students to read their descriptions aloud and then ask other students to add details the reader(s) may have missed. For example, with Murphy’s poem a few students always miss how the son goes home and takes a shot. This leads us into a discussion of the event and its significance.

Students often impose their television and movie experiences on the poem and embellish it with details and events. With poems more abstract than “Heavy Construction,” students are even more inclined to do this as they

strive to make sense of things. When this occurs, I ask them to take a close look at what they've written and underline details or events they have added—perhaps unknowingly. I then ask them to explain in writing, as best they can, why they added these details or events. From here we can move even closer to the original text and focus on the poet's language and use of detail.

Finally, I ask students to tell me which sections they purposely left out. In the case of "Heavy Construction," some students chose not to videotape the last three lines. After doing this exercise with different poems, students begin to notice that lines that are strictly reflection or metaphor are often keys to unlocking a poem. Even before they've discovered this, such lines become the subject of lengthy discussion as students try to understand what they cannot "see."

—ANNE WESSEL, COLUMBIA HS, MAPLEWOOD, N.J.

Choral Reading and Coloring Meaning

The following three techniques, one multi-voiced and the other two multi-colored, encourage students to discover richer ranges of meaning in poems. You can use these techniques in a single class period or present them in class and have students do out-of-class preparation for later.

Choral Reading

This exercise requires that a group of three or four students devise a choral reading of a poem using all of their voices. The goal is to communicate in imaginative ways what they have agreed is an important aspect of a given poem. Essentially, this exercise has three parts: 1) group discussion of the poem; 2) brainstorming and trying out various ways to "perform" the poem chorally; and 3) the performance itself. Once students understand the idea—and get over their initial feelings of shyness—they grow animated in discussing the poem and ways to perform it. Usually, I give them a few suggestions about how to vary or alter the text subtly to enhance the choral reading. Soon, they have imaginative ideas of their own. If you have student musicians in your class, distribute them among the various groups. Their experience with pitch, dynamics, rhythm, and tonality helps other students imagine this task.

Students surprise themselves and each other (and me) with the performances they devise, even when they have only one class period for preparation. It's fun to give different groups the same poem to work with, and see what happens.

This assignment also works well as a more formal presentation, for example at a school assembly. I find it beneficial to have the audience read the poem silently before the choral reading. After the performance, the group of readers helps the listeners catch things in the poem they may have missed. With students who need to master more formal analysis of poetry (for instance, preparing for an AP test), response to oral presentations leads them smoothly into written analyses of poems.

Coloring Meaning

Asking students to use colors to highlight different image strands or tone patterns on their own copies of a poem results in richer and more authoritative student readings. Students can work independently or in groups. As one student put it, "Doing this makes the poem more my own. I can take it into myself more." It's especially good to have students explain the reasons for the color choices they make. Students are fascinated by the various schemes people devise for the same poem or poems. As another student said, "It's neat how we all come up with different ways to draw the poem. I didn't think you could do that with just one poem."

Another productive "reading" technique is to have students use cray-pas to create on paper an important image in a poem. I ask them to use their renderings of an image to suggest its emotional overtones in the poem. Cray-pas easily achieve a variety of stunning effects, and students can accomplish their artworks in about half a period. They then spend the rest of the period discussing their creations, explaining what in the poem suggested their choices. Students always comment on how much richer the poem is than they originally thought. A nice dividend is the colorful visual display that immediately goes up on the bulletin boards.

—MARY JANE PETERSON, MANHASSET HS, MANHASSET, N.Y.

