

Teaching Poetry Writing Games to Grades 6-12

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Introduction: Building a desire for literacy

I've been teaching poetry to students from kindergarten through college for over two decades. During that time, I've experimented with many different exercises and approaches. In the following pages you'll find some of the techniques and activities that I've found work best for students in middle and high schools.

Although playing poetry games might at first seem to stray from curriculum goals, the changes I've witnessed in students after writing poetry for a week or two have astounded me. Countless times, I've seen students who were considered reluctant writers (due to poor literacy skills or being nonnative speakers) write poems that stunned me with their wit, honesty, and creativity. Even better, these students were proud of their poems, and they returned to other writing tasks with newfound confidence and enthusiasm. Writing poetry revived their sense of themselves as writers, and their sense of writing as relevant to themselves.

By allowing students to do writing that they like (rather than writing to please parents or teachers) and encouraging students to play with words in a safe, nonjudgmental setting, students are able to discover a new relationship to writing. The freedom and excitement of poetry enables students to shift from seeing writing as something that's fraught with failure, to something that's full of surprise and discovery. The most important step in teaching literacy is to instill a life-long passion for reading and writing. For many students, poetry can be the key that unlocks that passion.

Three Overarching Principles:

- 1) Give students an opportunity to write for themselves and their peers —*poetry by students for students*.
- 2) Create a safe space for students to take writing risks in.
- 3) Give students a structure or framework to play with writing in. Encourage students to write to explore and discover.

General Approaches and Techniques:

1) Break away from restrictive notions of poetry. Many students believe that poetry is all about flowers or love and has to rhyme. The purpose of playing writing games is to show students that writing poetry can be much more than this —it's about fresh, original uses of language. This is one reason why I usually call the activities "Writing Games." Only once they've done a few activities, will I tell them that they've created poems.

2) After introducing an activity, read a sample poem. Since the goal of playing poetry games is to get students to create writing that is meaningful to them, try to use other student poems as models. Pick poems that are full of surprising, fresh images and uses of language, and share these with students to inspire them to take risks and to illustrate what's possible. You might comment on what's good in the poem (or get students to respond to what they like) but do not criticize. If you criticize young writers' poems, students will internalize the voice of criticism, and either be too intimidated to write freely, or they'll write to please you, rather than themselves.

3) Relieve the pressure of the blank page. For most writers, getting started is the hardest part. Some of the poetry activities that work best for younger writers are ones where the first line is already started, such as the "Lost and Found" and "I Remember" activities (you might write several ways to start lines on the board). All the activities I've included here work by giving the writer some structure that students can then play around in. Think of activities as being literary playgrounds.

- 4) Use prewriting activities.** Depending on the activity, you might want to generate ideas on the board, such as a list of images or words students can use in their poems. Use this as an opportunity to encourage fresh, creative uses of language.
- 5) Give them time limits.** For each activity, tell them they will have 5, or 10, or 15 minutes (depending on the length of the activity) to write as much as they can without stopping. Keep careful track of time and warn students when they have only a minute or two left. This makes the writing into more of a game, and it encourages students not to censor themselves.
- 6) Don't think, just write!** Encourage students to write whatever pops into their heads. Tell them to let it be crazy, silly, weird, or strange. Tell them there are no rules, and no right or wrong answers. (When it comes to sharing, you might want to give a few rules, but let the writing be for them). The goal is to get students to surprise themselves with what they write. As many writers know, the best lines are often the ones that are discovered rather than consciously intended.
- 7) Afterwards, encourage students to title their poems.** Try to get them to consider what's at the heart of the poem, or how they want the reader to approach their poem. The title should add to the poem. With young writers, titling the poem can be the first step in the revision process by getting them to consider what a poem is about, or what guides the poem.
- 8) Share the poems.** For many students, getting to see the effect of their words is their reward for writing. Remember, the students are creating poetry for each other and themselves, so they need peer feedback. One rule you might want to use with sharing: They can't use the names of anyone in school in their poems (and if they did, they can't read their poem aloud).
- 9) Create a safe space for poetry.** Things might come up in poetry that might not ordinarily come up in class. In order for poetry games to be effective, students must feel free to take risks and be honest. Which means, they need to feel safe. No student has a right to interfere with the learning of others. So, if any student makes a disparaging remark, it's important to address that immediately.
- 10) Assign an Official Listener.** Each student who wants to share their poem must first listen to someone else's poem and state what image or line of the poem they liked and why. Once they've given good, positive feedback on someone else's poem, they can share their own (and get their own "Official Listener"). Assigning an official listener often causes the rest of the class to listen better and builds trust.
- 11) Only give positive comments.** With young writers, give frequent, specific praise by mirroring back to students what lines, images, or uses of language you want to encourage. Praise is a powerful way to influence their writing. For instance, praising fresh, sensory imagery encourages students to use more concrete sensory images. But for young writers, criticism often crushes creativity and betrays students' sense of poetry games as a way to play with writing and be honest without consequences.
- 12) Write with your students and share your work.** You'll be surprised by how much you might enjoy these activities, and students will love to hear your poems.
- 13) Vary what you do.** Use music, photos, pictures, objects (like apples, potatoes, and lemons), field trips, and so on to keep the writing games fresh and exciting. Enjoy the adventure!

14) Create a class book or literary magazine. Collect one or two poems from students, and type these up into a book that you can give to students. Or put the students in charge of creating the book. Creating a class book or zine helps to build a sense of classroom community and accomplishment. It also gives you a collection of poems you can use as poetry samples in the future.

Some Poetry Games:

I've grouped the following activities into three categories to give you some sense of what the activities emphasize and how advanced the exercises are. Several of these activities are my own invention, although they've likely been inspired by things I've encountered in other texts. Since poetry activities often get passed from teacher to teacher, changing as they go, it's hard to know where things originated. I've tried to give credit where possible. One resource I highly recommend checking out for exercise ideas is [The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises by Poets Who Teach](#) by Robin Behn.

Once you get a sense of what sort of activities work best for your students and how to structure the activities, try making up your own. It's a good idea to test out every activity by doing it yourself before you give it to your students. See "Sample Poems" for some examples of work created by me or other students from these exercises. And if you come up with a good activity, I'd love to hear it (I can be contacted through my website, www.ToddMitchellBooks.com).

Wild Mind Activities: The following are quick, beginner exercises designed to help students find what can only be said in poetry. It's important to encourage students to let their minds go wild and not worry about making sense or writing something "good." Although these exercises can be connected to different poetry concepts, they often work best when they're presented as fun writing games rather than exercises done to illustrate certain points (but after students have done them, you can point out what students have accomplished, i.e.: contrasting stanzas, effective use of sound, concrete imagery, alliteration, etc...).

Lost and Found — Start by generating a list of things that have been lost. Encourage students to think of things that couldn't possibly fit in a lost and found box, like "I lost the birds that soared inside my head." Then have students think of things that could be found, like "I found a dozen horses in my dirty tennis shoes." Encourage them not to worry about making sense. (See sample poems for an example).

Where I'm From — Ask students to write as many lines as they can about where they're from. However, rather than telling us where they're from, their challenge is to *show* us where they're from using all their senses, specific memories, and specific events (invented or real). What is the smell of where they're from? The taste? The feel? The sound? Etc... Encourage students to let their minds go wild and write whatever pops into their heads to show where they're from. (See sample poems for an example).

Poetry Language Test — To get students in a creative mindset, tell them you're going to give them a multiple choice test. Only, instead of picking the logically correct answer, they must choose the answer that they wish was true. If they like, they can also make up an answer. Once the test is done, they can pick one of their answers and expand it into a poem about what would happen if that were true. For instance: "What can you eat? Live frogs. Tornadoes. Pickles. The sun. Clouds?" The student could then write a poem about eating Tornadoes. This is a great exercise to introduce the concept of psychological truth — things can make sense in the language of poetry that might not make sense in ordinary language.

What's Inside Me — Rather than writing about their heart, lungs and intestines, ask students to write about things inside them that could not possibly fit inside them. Try to get them to use as much detail as possible.

On the board, put some line starts: “Inside me there are...” or “Inside me live...” or “Inside me grow...” to get them started. An accompanying activity you can do is to have students bring in a cardboard box. Once they’ve written their “Inside Me” poem, they can glue their poem to the box, and decorate the interior of the box with images that relate to the poem. (See sample poems for an example.)

Lies —(from Kenneth Koch’s Wishes Lies and Dreams) Encourage students to write a poem in which every line is an outrageous lie (i.e.: “I lived in the stomach of a black bear.”).

My Opposite —Use some discussion to get students to think about the concept of opposites. For instance you might ask them what the opposite of chocolate is (Vanilla? Broccoli? The moon?). Once they start thinking creatively about opposites, have them write about the life of their opposite. This gives them a safe way to explore and write about who they are.

I Remember —This is a classic that’s been used by many poets. Tell students they can start each line with “I remember...” and encourage students to use a mixture of real, specific memories, and things that they couldn’t possibly remember. Emphasize using specific, sensory details. (See sample poems for an example).

I Don’t Remember —This variation on the previous exercise can be done as a second stanza to the above poem. Again, encourage students to use a mixture of real and ridiculous non-memories.

List Poems —The possibilities here are endless. For example, you could ask students to write about “Things that are spicy.” Rather than simply listing salsas, challenge them to come up with memories, experiences, and images that evoke spiciness (“The way hydrogen peroxide felt when my mom poured it on my skinned knee/ the color of the sun at noon / the taste of needles / the time Suzie dared me to jump on glass...”). You can invent other versions of list poems, or have students come up with list poem ideas (i.e.: Things that are soft, Things that they wish were different, Things that are scary...). As an alternative, use colors. Students can list things that are red, or green, or yellow (as a collaboration, a class can put together a poem that has all the colors of the rainbow).

Questions —Have students write down a series of ridiculous questions, leaving a few empty lines after each question. Then challenge them to attempt to answer each question seriously. (Ex: “What lives inside the sun? / A thousand fish, swimming in the dark.”) Or, have students ask a series of serious questions, and give ridiculous answers. (Ex: “Why do wars lead to more wars? / Because the meat in the fridge went bad, and the dogs were hungry.”) See Nancy Willard’s “Questions My Son Asked: Answers I Never Gave Him” for an example. Students can also do this as a collaboration by writing questions for each other or coming up with questions as a class.

Translation —Put a series of unfamiliar symbols on the board or overhead. Tell students that it’s an ancient text from a lost civilization, and they’re the only ones in the world who can read it. Ask them to translate what it says (they can “read” it any way they like). Try and create the most basic, non-suggestive symbols. The goal of this exercise is to give the students a template through which they can express their subconscious.

Ekphrasis —This refers to poetry inspired by paintings (or other works of art). A quick websearch on Ekphrastic Poetry will give you plenty of examples. For older students you can give the assignment of finding a painting, researching it, and writing a poem inspired by it. Or, you can combine this assignment with a field trip to an art museum. Poetry inspired by music is also fun.

Maze Poem —This is a great activity for visual and tactile students. For this activity, you'll need copies of a maze from a children's activity book (you might need to enlarge this so students can write in the maze paths). Tell students to start writing a line about what they'd like to do in the future along one of the maze paths. The line they write doesn't need to make sense, and the object is not to solve the maze, so they shouldn't worry about what path they take. The challenge for the poem is simply this: write until the path they're on dead-ends. When it dead-ends, go back to one of the places where a different path branched off. Read the word nearest that branch and write another line, starting with that word, following that path until it dead-ends. Continue, until every path in the maze is full. (Now, how do you read it?)

Memory Box —This exercise comes from the poet Jake Adam York. If you like, you can start by giving students examples of Joseph Cornell's boxes (a quick online search will give you plenty of images). Most of these boxes were constructed of things Cornell found in the trash. Typically, though, memory boxes are constructed of things that are important to people. This activity involves constructing a poetic memory box. Begin by asking students to list five things:

- 1) a piece of paper
- 2) something you want, or something that makes you happy
- 3) something from where you (or your family) is from
- 4) one of earliest things you remember
- 5) something that you don't even know what it is, or what it means

For instance, one writer's list went like this: a map of rivers (paper), talking book (something he wanted), a piece of red clay (where he was from), a piece of steel (earliest thing), a fingerprint in ice (mystery thing). Once students have created their list of five things, give them 2-3 minutes to describe each thing. Tell them not to worry about telling us what it means or why it's important —just imagine it and describe it. They can describe each item in any order they like. Tell them not to worry about how the different things connect. The poem is the box. It's what holds them all together. (See sample poems for an example).

Map Poem —This is another great one from Jake Adam York. Ask students to think about a walk they often take (for instance, their walk home from school). Their challenge is to create a verbal map by writing a poem that takes the reader from one place to another, describing what someone would see, hear, smell, and feel along the way (encourage them to use all the senses). Students can use specifics, like street names as well. For an example of a famous poem that does something similar, read them Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died."

Poetry Leaps —This poem happens in four movements or stanzas. Reveal this poem step by step (so they don't know what's coming) and give students 3-5 minutes to work on each step. For this poem, you'll need to give each student, or groups of students, an organic object (apples, lemons, potatoes, etc...).

- 1) Have students start by describing the object using their senses —what does it look like, smell like, feel like, and sound like? (Avoid taste for now). Encourage them to compare the object to other things (ex: rather than writing, "the apple weighs about six ounces," write, "The apple weighs as much in my hand as the dead bird I found frozen on my window ledge..."). Try to get the students to be as specific as possible, and not to worry about making sense.
- 2) In the second stanza, have them imagine the object throughout time (Where did the apple come from? Where is it going? What will happen to it?).
- 3) In the third stanza, have them imagine what's inside the object (ex: "Inside are a hundred geese carrying seeds across a white winter sky").

4) And in the fourth stanza, have them address the object directly, and try asking it some questions (ex: “Apple, you kept your sweetness hidden beneath red, leathery skin. You wrapped your black seeds in white, empty rooms. What do you dream of now that the winter winds blow?”)

Found Language and Found Form Activities: These activities can bump students out of their ordinary ways of thinking about poetry while introducing new voices and new directions into their writing. All of the below activities use either language or forms that come from outside the writer. Most of these activities work well with intermediate and advanced students.

Five Objects and an Old Saying Changed — This activity (one of my favorites) is a modified version of one given in The Practice of Poetry. Have students start by writing five objects that could be found in a kitchen on five slips of paper. Put all the slips of paper in a hat and pass it around. Students should choose five slips from the hat that are not their own. For the second requirement, have students think of common sayings (these must be recognizable), and warp them in some way. For instance, rather than “The early bird gets the worm,” you could have, “The early worm gets eaten.” Or, as one fifth grader used in her poem, rather than “A needle in a haystack,” she wrote, “A haystack full of needles.”

Once students have five kitchen objects, and the idea of how to change an old saying, give them this challenge: Write a poem about your family using all five objects and at least one old saying changed. Encourage them to let it be strange. (See sample poems for an example.)

Encyclopedia Poem — For this activity, it’s necessary to have pages copied from an esoteric source with terminology that’s very different from student’s ordinary language (I like using pages from a set of 1950’s encyclopedia’s that I have). Each student can choose a page (for instance an entry on the pyramids of Egypt, or astronomy, or “Our Friend the Atom”). Once each student has a page, tell them to skim the page (don’t read it careful) and circle 15 words or phrases based on whatever catches their eyes. After they’ve circled 15 words or phrases, their challenge is to write a poem about an intense emotional experience (an argument with someone, discussion about something difficult, love poem, etc...). The catch is that they need to use at least one of their circled words or phrases in *every line*, and the poem cannot be about anything similar to the encyclopedia entry they had (so if they grabbed a page about boxing, they can’t write about a fist-fight). Encourage students to work quickly and not to worry about making sense. (See sample poems for an example.)

Found Form Poem — Just as a poem can use found language, as in the Encyclopedia Poem exercise, a poem can use a found form. For this you can either provide students with different forms or ask them to find different forms on their own (such as a math test, a recipe, the ingredients on a box of food, search engine results, etc...). It will be helpful to make sure students have an example of the form they’re going to be imitating. Their challenge is to write a poem in the form of the thing they’ve chosen, while having it defy all typical expectations of that particular form. For instance, if they selected a math test, they could write a series of word problems arranged like a typical math test, but that aren’t about math.

The Story — For this exercise, ask students to write a poem in the form of a story, with three stanzas representing a beginning, a middle, and an end. If they like, they can start with “Once upon a time....” The catch: their story can’t make narrative sense. Encourage them to let it be ridiculous. Also, they need to use dialogue somewhere in their poem.

Spy Poem — This is another way of using found language that helps students pay attention to dialogue, and to think about how dialogue can be used in poetry. This assignment is only recommended for mature

students. I usually ask students to start several days in advance by eavesdropping on people's conversations and writing down what they hear. The goal is to capture *how* people say things (what particular phrases or idioms people use). It's helpful to encourage students to listen to conversations between people who are very different from themselves (so rather than eavesdropping on other high school students, they could spy on the way six-year-olds talk). Once they've collected a few pages of dialogue, their challenge is to write a poem using only words and phrases that they wrote down (so the more they collect, the more material they'll have to work with).

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a _____ — This activity models its form after Wallace Stevens's poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." It's a good idea to use that poem as a model. Bring in some other object for the students to focus on (bagel, orange, turnip, potato...) and have them come up with thirteen (or seven or nine) stanzas describing that object, similar to how Stevens does in his poem. This can be done as an individual or a group activity, with each student in a group contributing stanzas. (See sample poems for an example.)

The Apology — This activity, like the above, imitates the form of another famous poem, "This Is Just To Say" by William Carlos Williams. You might want to use that poem as a model. Then ask students to write an apology for something they did that they're not really sorry about.

Twitter Poetry — Tweets and poetry have a lot in common since they both use compressed forms of language. For this exercise, ask students to write short 140 character posts (or 280 characters) about things they couldn't possibly be doing, but break the lines like poetry (it's sort of a 21st Century haiku).

Dictionary Poem — Unless you have a bunch of dictionaries, it might be helpful to break students into small groups for this exercise so that each group can have a dictionary. Students should open the dictionary to a random page, close their eyes, and point to a word. They'll need to do this three times, writing down the word and the definition each time. (If in groups, all the students in the group can use the same three words). Their challenge is to write a poem with four stanzas. Each of the words they chose will represent a stanza (they can change the order of the words) and each stanza should in some way define the meaning of the word without using the word. For instance, if the word they turned to was "saliva: the watery mixture of secretions from the salivary and oral mucous glands that lubricates chewed food" they could write for that stanza, "You talk like a waterfall / words gnashing me up / crunching my bones / and melting my thoughts into a mushy pulp / until I'm swallowed and forgotten." The fourth stanza they write should endeavor to tie all the different words together, and in this stanza, they can use the words they looked up.

Passing Poem (a.k.a. Exquisite Corpse) — This works best with older students. Have each student write a line about something they did that morning (or what they want to be, or what they wish could happen). Then have them pass their paper to their right. The next student reads only the last word of the line before and writes a new line that uses that word in some way. Let this continue until every student gets their paper back (if you have a large class, you might divide it into two hemispheres). Once students have their own paper, encourage them to read all the lines that have been written and add a last line that brings the whole poem together. One rule to mention: no names can be used in this activity!

Poetic Concepts: These activities all highlight different poetic concepts and can be used to reinforce specific poetry terms and lessons (they're also fun).

Abstraction vs. Image: Beginning writers often struggle with making their writing more concrete by using images that readers can experience with their senses. This activity focuses on the difference between abstractions and images, and how to make the abstract something a reader can experience. First, have students come up with a list of abstractions on the board. I usually encourage students to avoid common abstractions like "happiness" and "love" and go for more specific ones like "despair," "nostalgia," "lust," and "longing." After students have generated a good list of abstractions, ask them to pick one that interests them. Then have them write what their abstraction looks like, feels like, smells like, sounds like, and tastes like, going through all five senses. (See sample poems for an example of this).

If you want to take this activity a step further, have students think of a setting and a character for their abstraction, then write a poem, using images and metaphor, to show the emotion without stating it (see T.R. Hummer's "Where You Go When She Sleeps" for an example of this).

Sense Memory Game: Bring in a series of objects with distinct smells and textures (a lemon, vapor rub, ginger root, etc...). Keep the objects in a paper bag. Break students up into small groups and tell them to close their eyes. Then pass one object around each group and have the students smell and feel it. Once the objects have gone around, put them back in a bag and have the students write about what the object *reminds* them of. The catch: they can't name the object (for instance, if it's a lemon, they can't use the word, "lemon").

Recipe for a Poem: This is one of my favorite activities, since it takes the stress away from figuring out how to structure a poem (and often when the conscious mind is distracted, the unconscious works its magic). Give your students a series of short tasks to fulfill for each line. Note, you can structure these tasks to emphasize whatever concepts or terminology you've been discussing in class. Have students fulfill all the tasks as quickly as possible. Once they've written a draft, they can revise, cutting out, adding, or rearranging things. For instance:

- 1) Begin the poem with a simile
- 2) Have the second line build on that simile
- 3) Appeal to all five senses in the next lines
- 4) Create a metaphor using food
- 5) Refer to a childhood memory
- 6) Use a slang word that you've never seen used in a poem before
- 7) Say something that makes no logical sense
- 8) Refer to yourself by your childhood nickname
- 9) Write a line where you brag about something you could never do
- 10) Make a statement, then contradict your statement
- 11) Create a metaphor using a holiday
- 12) Refer to a childhood toy
- 13) Use alliteration
- 14) Create a line that uses synesthesia
- 15) Return to an image used earlier in the poem

For a student sample of this see "You" in the sample poems. Or for other ideas on this exercise, check out Jim Simmerman's "The 20 Exercise Poem" in [The Practice of Poetry](#). Variation: have students invent their own recipe then write a poem that follows the steps (or they can create recipes for each other).

Haibun —Haibun is a traditional Japanese form that's gaining popularity in English. There are many ways the form is defined, but one simple variation (think of this as the Oreo cookie poem) is a haiku, followed by a prose paragraph, followed by a haiku. So the haibun form is a mixture of poetry and prose, typically about a journey of some sort. Starting and ending with haiku (that hard cookie exterior) allows the poem to begin and end with images, while having a paragraph in the middle (that gooey center) allows the poem to progress in a different manner. You can find many other variations and examples of Haibuns online.

Walking Poem —This is an activity to help students understand that line breaks and rhythm in poetry are not arbitrary. Instead, meter and line create pace and breath. Here's what I tell students to do for this: "Write as you are walking. Speed up and slow down. If you can, try doing this outside and inside. Write what you're thinking, what you see, what you feel. For safety's sake, do not write if you are crossing the street, and be careful on the stairs." After students have written while moving around for a bit, have them come back and share some of their lines. See if they can notice a difference between when they were walking slowly vs. quickly. How did the line length (the breath of the poem) and the meter change?

Writing by Sound —Poetry is a language where the sound of words can matter as much as their meaning. Rather than picking words by their meaning, try writing by sound. Here's the challenge: Remember an argument you've had with someone (parent, friend, date, crazy uncle...). Picture where you had this argument and what you were doing before and after the argument (what you were eating, what smells and sounds were around you, etc...). Now write a poem depicting this argument by following these guidelines:

- 1) The poem will have two stanzas. The first stanza should pose a problem or conflict, and the second stanza can hint at the solution, or aftermath to that conflict.
- 2) In the first stanza, write as many lines as you can using words with hard, aggressive sounds ("ck" "t" "p" "k" and "ch" sounds). It might help to make a list of harsh, aggressive sounding words before writing ("crater," "smack" and "pork chops" for instance —you might create a list on the board as a class).
- 3) In the second stanza, try to use soft, smooth, sensual sounding words ("l" "s" "m" and "n" sounds). Again, it might help to make a list of words before you write ("susurrous," "languid," and "lonely").
- 4) Try not to make sense! The point is to let sound dictate the direction of your lines rather than meaning. If you get stuck, look at the last word you wrote and start the next line with a word that has similar sounds (i.e. if a line ended with "broken stick" you could start the next line with "Halloween tricks").

Note: Decide beforehand what your policy on swearing for this activity is, as many "bad" words have interesting sounds.

The Rules Game —Have students contribute a series of rules for a common activity, such as "How to Eat Dinner," "How to Dress Yourself," or "How to Write a Poem." The one rule is that each rule must be ridiculous. (See sample poems for an example.)

Collaborations —Collaborating is a fun way to address revision, especially with more advanced writers. In small or large groups, you can have students select individual lines or sections from their work (for instance, their "I remember" poem, or a list poem using "colors"), and discuss how they could put this together with other students' selected lines to create a group poem. As a group, they can discuss which lines should go where, and why.

Serial Poems —Have students come up with a process that they can use to write a poem each day for a week. For instance, they might write for five minutes when they first wake up about what they're planning to do that day. Then five minutes before they sleep about what they did. Or they might set an alarm for midnight and spend five minutes each day writing what they're thinking then (a series of midnight poems). Many contemporary poets have written whole books using serial approaches like this.

Sample Poems: Unless otherwise noted, the following samples are quick, unrevised drafts done by me to give examples for the exercises (I was only able to get permission to use a few student poems). Before doing any activity, it's a great idea to do it yourself —then you'll have another sample that you can share with your students. Note: This isn't about writing great poetry. If you even come up with one line that startles, beguiles, or for whatever reason pleases you, then the writing is a success.

Lost and Found Example

I lost my sense in my sentence,
and the words will not come back
I lost a desert to a turtle
who couldn't tell me the name of sand
I lost a dictionary to the hole
that swallowed up our drain pipes
Then I lost the hole to the letter "Z"
buried between the folds of "W"
I lost the time I spent writing about the playground
until the chain pinched my hands
I lost the needles I stuck in my eye
for promises I couldn't keep
I lost the perfect white spaces of this
once blank page
I lost the birds that flew from
my mind and landed in an inky pool.

I found a desert in the corner of my bedroom,
and sleep between the boards
I found the words I couldn't think of
hidden behind the dresser, the armoire,
the pantaloons, the pipsqueek
I found the end of my sentence
wrapped in a monkey's tail jumping
from tree to beanstalk
I found the names of my siblings, the ones
who were never born
written on the back of a grocery list
I found a direction to shoot my arrows
when all my enemies were inside me
I found what I could not say,
and have never said it.

Where I'm From

I'm from ground as flat as the floor
For as far as you can see. I'm from,
Summer carnivals, Tang and soft pretzels with yellow
mustard, flying ears of corn, pumpkin parades, and
midnight humidity.

I'm from dogs that pull skateboards,
And Bloody Murder in the cemetery.
I'm from five tornadoes touching down,
And one taking my spirit tree.
I'm from the smell of cut grass, and pancakes
on Sunday.
Storms ripped up where I'm from,
And left the remains in a Walmart parking lot.
I'm the squeak of shopping cart wheels
rolling over the rubble of where I'm from.

Image vs. Abstraction Example

Longing looks like a dried worm on the road
when the sun comes out after a rainstorm.
It tastes like salt on the spine
of a cactus. The sound of longing
is the sound of tortoises crossing a desert.
It smells like the cherry lip gloss
you left in my bedside drawer.
Touching longing is like touching
an oven burner when it's cold.
Still, I draw my hand away, expecting
it to burn.

I Remember Poem

I remember when I was the oldest man in the world,
and all the monkeys worshipped me.
I remember, before I was born, I lived
in the ocean and swam with dolphins.
I remember the insides of stars,
where ice melts fire.
I remember the Queen saying "Off with his head,"
and then I woke up.
I remember the first cartoon I ever watched.
I remember never getting up early enough
to do what I wanted to do.
I remember forgetting something important.
I remember when wolves
taught me how to be a person.
I remember the last time I dreamed I was myself.

My Opposite

I was the fattest girl in the world.
I weighed 10,000 pounds.
Got sick. Died.
They buried me in a crater.
When I went to heaven,
Heaven caved in and fell to earth.
And earth was filled with heaven,
And no one was ever mean again.
—Martin (4th grade boy)

Inside Me Example

Inside me there are rivers, flowing through my veins,
into an ocean in my belly
Inside me live whales, calling in my dreams
Sharks swim behind my eyes
And dolphins swim in my muscles
Inside me grows a forest, with moss beneath my feet,
and a raven whispering me secrets
Deer run inside my head, chased by
lions through the night
Inside me is a mountain I want to climb.

Encyclopedia Poem

How You Can Explore the Universe

Telescopes bring stars closer but can't bring us
together
Sir Isaac Newton theorized
Everything in the universe, you
pulls on everything else, me
Your exothermics oscillate
You change from red to
yellow to
white
But I can't figure your gravity
Your perturbations fluctuate
I'm struck with thermic fever
I'll fight to remain your
Satellite
To be part of your equation
The calculations are tedious work
The interferometer confusing
Will another star break our syzygy
and cause an eclipse?
—Kevin Paryzer

Memory Box

In the box is a map of all the water that moves in
Alabama. Where it rains the map bruises then slowly
heals, a spill of ink, then gone. The map just shows
the water, not land, not roads, no borders. And the
people only barely show where the rain touches them.

A fist-sized mound of clay the color of dried blood.
Someone has packed it down, and you can almost see
the lines of a hand that held it. Inside there's a tiny
woman who sits clutching her knees. You cannot see
her.

A slug of steel, so shiny the light slides right off it. If
you held it in your hand it would sink to the floor.
Your hand would sweat and the slug would smell like
a factory, hot metal, hot people, the weight of
everything.

A talking book. When you turn the pages, if you could
turn the pages, she's telling you a story, but the pages
are blank.

A piece of ice that never melts. A fingerprint inside.
—Jake Adam York

How to Write a Poem

(by Ms. Henkes' Third Grade Class)

Whenever you use the word "a" you have to make the
poem green.

- Step 1: When I write "g" write in pink.
- Step 2: Don't spike the paper.
- Step 3: Don't slobber and drool on the paper.
- Step 4: Don't go into the paper.
- Step 5: Don't make the paper green.

Let your brain write for you, meaning cut open your
head take out your brain and put it on the paper and let
it write for you.

No writing upside down. You have to write with the
eraser side of your paper. No running on the paper.
You have to tie your shoe before you write "Hi!"

Don't sniff stuff like your feet and arms while you're
writing. Don't smell your feet when you're writing.
Don't erase or that means you're weird!

Five Objects and An Old Saying Changed

Pets

My father took a cleaver to our first dog.
“What doesn’t kill you makes you
hungrier,” he said. When I was six, we got
our first microwave. I tried to cook a fork,
and the plastic inside melted and dripped
like intestines. After that, we had no more
pets. My sister was allergic, and besides,
my mother liked to keep a clean house. We
sneeze often around each other. In spring,
when I started to shed, I was sent out.
My father took a cleaver to our first dog.
“To eat or not to eat,” he said. He taught me
cruelty was injuring an animal and not
killing it. On a night in July, I limped
across the cornfield to sing my screams.
The dog was buried in our garden
beneath the cucumbers.

Recipe for a Poem

You

You eat like a pig at a trough
It’s me that’s being devoured
Your fingers are dead
Resting on my bare thigh
The words escaping from your lips
Form cartoon bubbles above our heads
Always about us
They mean everything to you,
Nothing to me anymore
The Clash play in the background
Stale peppermint works my jaw
Burned toast lingers
Your breath tastes like
The expired milk I have left on the fridge shelf.

I’m reminded of:

A time when I kissed boys on the playground
Until they forgot their girlfriends were watching
Nobody did the nasty back then
Because lunches were served on green trays
I could run a marathon in ten minutes flat
Billie Billie Puff Puff was always there
A hug given to me by Vern back in Kemmerer
For maturing into "quite a woman."
I wasn't quite a woman.

Now, the myriad books can’t help us
We are as alone as a holiday dinner with relatives
next week we’ll try again to make us work
And rubber ducks in bubble baths
will lead me back to you
From where I’ve been gone
I should leave you to keep you here with me

Even as trees pick up fallen birds
And flowers undress in daylight
The bubbled words overlapping each other
Fail to make any sense

—Billie Lightfoot

Seven Ways of Looking at a Class

1.

Around a table, the students are writing,
penning the places they would rather be.

2.

At 3:30 the class will be over,
the lights turned off in the room.
The pages flutter home,
yet the homework is not done.

3.

The class is still in session.
The wind must be blowing.

4.

Oh great writers of generations past,
do you not see the class
on which you are sitting?

5.

A class gets out, scatters
across the campus — five
people walking different directions,
fleeing one mind.

6.

A white board, a marker, and
a word are one.
A white board, a marker, a word
and an eraser are one.

7.

O thin professors of Eddy,
Why do you imagine chattering classes?
Do you not see how the students
dance upon the floor of their
lives around you

