

LESSON FOR POETRY: SENSES AND FEELINGS

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Eliciting meaningful poetry from elementary children is no small task. Usually rhyme is the focal point for poetry lessons in elementary classrooms, with the result often being verses with three-letter words: “The fat cat sat on my hat.” Indeed, that verse meets the criteria of rhyme, it probably produced some amusement to the child who composed it, and it makes for reasonably simple proofing and editing. However, that verse is not necessarily poetry in its truest sense because it does not stem from the heart. How, then, can a teacher elicit from children poetry that does *stem from the heart*?

Asking myself that question, I rolled words through my mind on the long drive home from Arcola School one Friday afternoon. Spring vacation was upon us; I faced a glorious week of freedom, marred only by the fact that Florida was not a part of that week—as it was, it seemed, for the entire population of Indiana! I recalled the year we actually did go to Florida: The first day was so cold that I wanted to return to Fort Wayne for my ski sweater; the second day I learned that sun reflects from concrete, up onto the backs of my thighs, between the plastic strips of a lawn chair, to produce a zebra-like burn that prompted me to apply sunscreen with an SPF of 15 to all parts of my exposed—and over-exposed—body. Who needs Florida? No one even knew I had been there! Ah, but I had the shells from the morning and evening walks we had taken along the Indian Rocks Beach. There was the start of my poem. That would be the perfect beginning for a poetry lesson: My poem (to prove that I could, in fact, compose a poem!) in rhymed verse would generate the lesson.

And so it began. I fended off the germ of another poem, forced my green Flair pen to roll out metrically accurate lines that would hit the listeners with memories of their own vacations or dreams of what it might have been. And so I produced it:

Tell me, What's a Poem?

I have heard a poem before.
It took me to an ocean shore.
I held the shell up to my ear.
The waves were splashing very near.
The taste of salt was in my mouth.
I felt that I had traveled south.
I closed my eyes and saw the dunes.
The wind was whistling sandy tunes.
And when I opened up my eyes,
I got the very biggest surprise:
I wasn't on the beach at all—
just sitting here beside the wall,
reading a poem so real in words
that I even heard the ocean birds
flapping their wings across the sky—
higher and higher they did fly.
I felt the sand between my toes.
I smelled the salt inside my nose.
My fingers felt all sandy, wet.
The poem made me sense it, I bet!

—Mrs. Kathy Sherman

My intention was mostly instructional: I wanted to be able to show the children that poetry deals with the senses; I wanted to show the children that composing a poem is possible. And yet, I was not satisfied. That poem might make them think that poetry **MUST** rhyme. Perhaps that other germ of a poem could be let loose now. This time, the words literally rolled themselves onto the paper. This time, I thought, I won't worry about proper sentences, meter, rhyme, or any of that sort of accuracy.

Germination
(Breaking Out of the Seed)

I feel a poem coming on
it's small and smooth,
rounded
like a seed in a shell
inside my heart.

If I water it
with words
and hoe the dirt with thoughts,
Maybe the poem that's coming on
will sprout
right out
like a seed does.

There! I see a fresh green sprout
pushing a bud at the top.
I want to touch the slender stalk
and feel it,
fragile,
in between my fingers.

But if I wait a day or two
and kneel by my plant tomorrow,
and put my ear beside it,
I'll hear the petals of the snapdragon
unfolding from the bud,
quieter than morning.

One more day
and my poem opens
petals pink
and smelling of spring.

I want to pinch the stalk
and pluck the stem
and give you my flower, leaves and all,
but instead
I'll give you my poem.

—Mrs. Kathy Sherman

Yes, I decided, that would do. When I read that poem, I thought, I'll tell the students that I once wrote a poem to a friend, as an accompaniment to a gift. I'll tell them about what my friend said: "I like the gift, but I like the poem more. You bought the picnic tray with your money, but you bought the poem with your heart." Between these two poems, I decided, there would be a starting point for each student.

With the lesson ready, I scheduled visits to the classrooms of first, second, and third grade classrooms throughout Northwest Allen County Schools. I was fortunate to have elementary teachers who

welcomed me to their classrooms, elementary children who still like to call me the witch—in remembrance of the October visits I had made to every elementary classroom in the corporation, dressed as a witch with silvered hair and hands, black hat and cape, and spooky poetry. And, I am fortunate to have a compilation of all the poems which my lesson elicited. Here are just a few:

Without training wheels
pedal pedal pedal pedal
—Dave

The Purple Poem

Purple pleases me.
I like purple
because it looks
nice on me
when you see me.
—Jennifer

Up in the sky
I heard a bird
telling a lie
then I heard some
noise
some people talking
than I heard some
more noise
I heard some people saying
some things are bad things
are bad things
do you know what they
were saying
something about spring
some very bad things
—Alex

These first grade poems have been edited for spelling and line endings, to make reading easier and to demonstrate the difference between verse and poetry.

I have included a narrative of the poetry lesson so that elementary teachers can replicate it, complete with notes about alternate poems which could easily be used in place of the ones which I composed. I would urge teachers to compose their own poems for their classes, for the relationship between the poet and the audience becomes particularly meaningful for children when they know the poet in other ways. In fact, I suggest that teachers using this lesson include something slightly dramatic—a hat of some kind, a funny shirt, both of which can be donned for the lesson and removed at its conclusion—in the way of costume to help children recognize that the poet in everyone DOES exist.

LESSON FOR POETRY SENSES AND FEELINGS

The objectives of this lesson are to

- * permit students to write poems which do not necessarily rhyme
- * awaken in students a sensitivity to the sensory words in poetry
- * demonstrate one way to consider words before using them in poems
- * encourage students to compose poems without necessarily using the words that correspond to the emotions which the poetry-writer wants to share with the reader.

The materials used for this lesson are

- * copies of "Tell me, What's a Poem" by Mrs. Sherman¹
- * blank paper
- * pencils
- * copies of "Germination" by Mrs. Sherman²
- * students' imaginations

Overall process:

- * pass out sheets of paper, poems, pencils
- * introduce and read "Tell me, What's a Poem"
- * prewriting (relates to senses)
- * add "Germination"
- * compose poems
- * turn in poems
- * read silently while others finish

Narrative:

When all the papers and pencils are sitting on the students' desks, I begin with the question, "What's a Poem?" Sometimes I vary the question: "What's the first thing you think of when I say poetry?"

If students respond with "rhyme," I say, "I do, too. Today, the poem we are going to read first is one that rhymes. I composed it with rhymed words to show you that I can do it. We will also read a poem that doesn't rhyme. The poems you write will not have to rhyme." Then I go on to introduce the poem.

If the students respond with "imagination" or "feelings" or "emotions," I write the word on the board. If no one mentions those, I simply go on to introduce the poem.

For young children (grades one and two), I introduce the poem by telling them that there will be parts of the body mentioned in the poem. I tell them to remember them.

For older children (grades three through six), I introduce the poem by telling them that it was composed to teach them about poetry. I tell them that I really wanted to be outside, but that I knew I had to compose a poem before I could go out to play.

Then I read the poem. I actually close my eyes when I get to the line about closing my eyes. Sometimes I flap my arm against my side when I read the line about the birds. Sometimes I lift my hand up high when I read the line about "higher and higher." I always wiggle my toes on that line.

My next step is usually quite fun. The children are asked to tell me (for younger children) what parts of the body I mentioned; or (for older children) what they felt like while reading the poem.

I draw on the board a sketch of each part of the body, in whatever order they mention them:

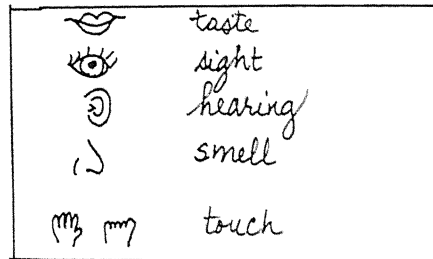
mouth

eyes

ears

nose

fingers, toes



For younger children, I let the pictures do the talking. For older children, I write the word associated with that body part to identify the senses.

As we discuss these body parts, I ask them to tell me which words they could taste, see, hear, smell, and feel.

Invariably, someone will say that the birds were flying. I ask them to tell me how they knew the birds were flying. Then we say the words "flapping" and "flying"; I ask them which one makes more noise or sounds more like what the birds really sounded like. "Flapping" always wins.

Sometime I'd like to do this lesson with an open-ended time limit so I could really revel in the sensory words, but I usually have to move along rather quickly, so I try to get each student (by the end of the lesson) to contribute one word. To do that, the sensory words get mixed up, but I really think that is not an inhibiting factor. We really do not think about words as particular to one sense or another very often, and many poems ignore smell altogether, so I let this fine point slide.

Now we are ready to start the prewriting. I ask students to write their names on their blank papers in the upper right hand corner. For younger children, I sometimes omit this and move right into the prewriting.

For young children, the prewriting consists of one of two activities:

*draw a picture of something you love

or

*write a word about something you enjoy

write another word which is part of it

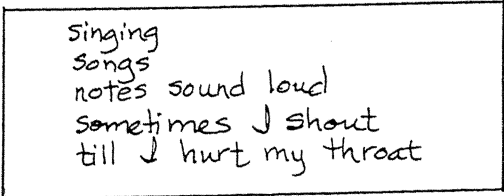
write a word about how it smells, tastes, feels, looks, or sounds

write a word about what you do with it.

I usually give a sample on the board, asking children to choose something else for their prewriting. I also tell them that they may not have a word on each of the lines.

Sometimes the youngest children's prewriting turns out to be their finished product. I let that be.

Chalkboard sample:
(for young children)



Singing
songs
notes sound loud
sometimes I shout
till I hurt my throat

A word about scribal problems is in order. Some children cannot spell well. Some want to spell correctly. Some can put down enough letters to get the word across. I respect the teacher's usual approach, or I ask permission from the teacher to let them use phonetic or pictorial spelling. A picture of a Dalmatian will be more meaningful than the word "dog."

I try to circulate through the room during the prewriting, encouraging each child's work, asking questions, even suggesting words for children who seem to be stuck.

The prewriting for older children is more complicated.

First I ask them to write their first and last names in the upper right hand corner. Under that, I ask them to write the name of their teacher. Under that, I ask them to write the date.

Then we turn the papers over so that the blank page is facing us.

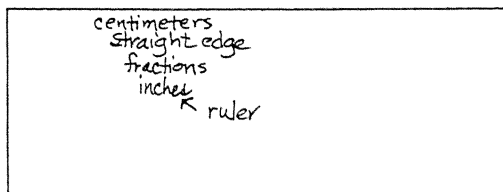
In about the middle of the page, I ask them to write the word that they think they'll write their poem about. I tell them it has to be a word they could draw a picture of, but I tell them not to draw the picture. We want to use words to make the pictures in someone else's imagination. I mention that they probably felt as if they had gone on a little vacation when we read "Tell me, What's a Poem" but that the word vacation would not have taken everyone to the ocean.

When everyone has a word (and sometimes this takes a little time; if there isn't immediate scratching of pencils, I starting making suggestions as fast as I can: "BMX bike" "pine tree" "swingset" "baseball glove" "my pet garter snake" "Tyrannosaurus Rex" "tulip.")

I do one on the board, again asking students to choose one that is different from mine.

Next, I ask students to draw an arrow upward and to list the parts that make up their word. I give rapid-fire examples if there is any indication that they aren't quite sure what to do: "If you wrote 'BMX bike,' your parts will be wheels, spokes, handlebars. If you wrote 'pine tree,' your parts will be needles, branches, trunk, forest. If you wrote 'swingset,' your parts might be swings, teeter totter, and so on."

Chalkboard sample:
(for older children)



When children have chosen words that do not lend themselves to “parts” well, I say “write words that go with it” and give an example: “If you chose ‘baseball,’ you might write mitt, bat, and other things that go with the baseball.”

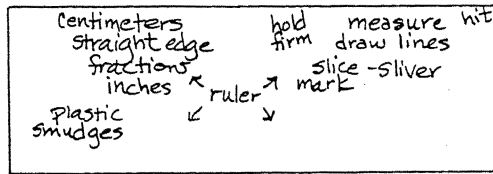
The second step of the word-generation stage is tough. Students have to list words above another arrow to show the things that the word does, that the parts do, or that they do WITH the word.

Somewhere in the prewriting, I explain that when I am writing a poem I do this in my head, but that they are doing it on paper today so that I can help them.

While they are writing the verbs, I go around and help them if they need it. If they are generating words well, I encourage them. A hand on the shoulder or a “good word here” goes a long way.

I do my sample, too:

Chalkboard sample:



Next I direct their attention to the senses listed on the board. I ask them to try to think of anything else that might be smelled, tasted, touched, heard, or seen. That is what they list for the third arrow.

Then comes the fourth arrow. They’ll be relieved to know that for this one it is not necessary to write a word. Here they simply need to think about what it is that they want their reader to feel. I tell them they do not need a word here. They may write one, but they may not.

We’ve finished the prewriting now, so there is now a nice break. For young children, the next step in the lesson might not occur for as long as two weeks from now. For older children, however, it is better to continue the lesson, lest they forgot or lose the sensitivity and concentration they are developing.

The instructional break here is provided by a review of what we have learned: that poetry includes the sights, sounds, tastes, feelings, and smells of words that are important. HOWEVER, there

is one more thing that needs to be included: the heart. (Draw one on the chalkboard.)

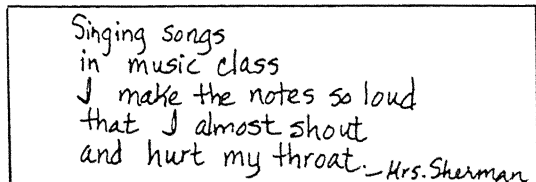
Now is the time to read “Germination.” This poem does not rhyme. I tell children that I actually prefer poems that do not rhyme (but I don’t let that statement interfere with my appreciation of their verse later). I tell them that I wrote this poem so that they would be able to share the knowledge I have about writing poetry.

If time permits, I now relate (before I read the poem) a little anecdote about a poem which I wrote to accompany a gift which I gave to a friend. My friend told me that she like the gift, which I bought with my money; she LOVED the poem—even more—because I bought IT with my heart.

After reading the poem “Germination,” I tell the students to read their own prewriting, to look at it until their heart or mind tells their fingers what to write. I tell them it must be quiet, for poetry comes out better from a quiet place.

For young children, I tell them to add words to their prewriting. When they are “finished,” I tell them to add illustrations. Then I do mine on the board.

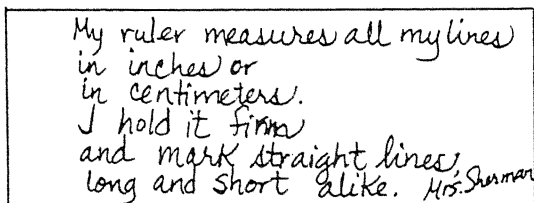
Chalkboard sample:
(for young children)



Singing songs
in music class
I make the notes so loud
that I almost shout
and hurt my throat. —Mrs. Sherman

For older children, I do my sample right away.

Chalkboard sample:
(for older children)



My ruler measures all my lines
in inches or
in centimeters.
I hold it firm
and mark straight lines,
long and short alike. Mrs. Sherman

With older children, as soon as I have finished my sample, I go around and encourage them, finding “good word,” “nice image here,” and similar positive remarks.

When the children are starting to finish, I interrupt to tell them what the next activity is (Silent Quiet Reading Time is my favorite) and proceed to let them read their poems to me. Sometimes I send them back to add a word or another sentence.

The conclusion for me was to have the poems typed, with line-endings determined by me. I returned the typed poems to the teacher, but other conclusions might lend themselves well to the regular classroom teacher's use of this lesson: later refinement (copy the poem in ink, mount it on construction paper) and posting on the bulletin board. Reading the poems aloud is another good concluding activity, as is providing copies to the local newspaper.

For a really excited group, it would be possible to produce additional poems and then choose some for including in a booklet produced by the class. For a particularly strong group, it might be possible to develop follow-up lessons on line-endings, metaphors, similes, and personifications.

The purpose of this lesson is to demonstrate to students their own potential for writing poetry. Not EVERY student will produce marvelous poetry, but EACH student will benefit from the encouragement and from the prewriting techniques which they experience.

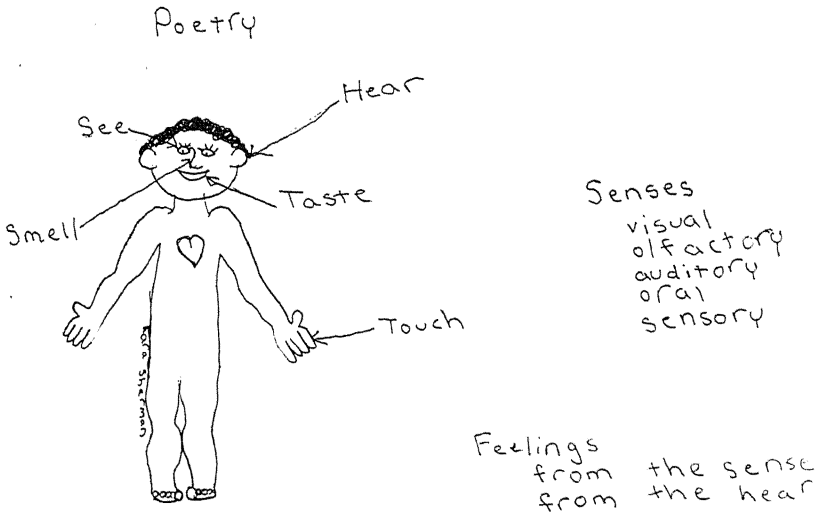
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NOTES

¹Other poems work equally well for establishing the basis for a poetry lesson. Eleanor Farjeon's poem entitled "Poetry" (*The Random House Book of Poetry for Children*, Random House: New York, 1983, 196) addresses the enigmatic nature of poetry in words children can readily understand: "What is Poetry? . . . Not the sea, but the sound of the sea;/ Not myself, but what makes me/ See, hear, and feel. . . ." Langston Hughes' "Poem" compacts experience into a mere six lines of poignant words to which children will readily respond (*Don't You Turn Back*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1969, page 24). Judith Viorst's "Sometimes Poems" (*If I Were In Charge of the World and other worries*, Atheneum: New York, 1982, pages 36-37) personifies poems with her wry yet innocent view of life as a source of humor. Since children at the youngest ages often have difficulty knowing when to end lines of poetry, this last one might produce a discussion of how to use a single word as an entire line of poetry.

²*The Scott, Foresman Anthology of Children's Literature* (Scott, Foresman and Company: Glenview, Illinois, 1984) contains an abundance of poems appropriate for initiating poetry from children. Bobbi Katz's "Sunbake" (page 10 depicts

a narrator at a beach, "rising,/rising,/RISING/to the sun." Eve Merriam's "Thumbprint" (page 11) addresses the uniqueness of the individual, using vocabulary appropriate for older children. (Langston Hughes' "Poem" is found on page 21.) Robert Frost's "Dust of Snow" (page 26) establishes a source of hope from "The dust of snow." Walter de la Mare's "The Snowflake" (page 128) captures the transience of beauty, particularly found in a snowflake which is ". . . on/ Your finger laid. . . ." Rachel Field's "A Charm for Spring Flowers" (page 124) develops a reverence for the cycle of life.



Poetry appeals to the senses.

Poetry conveys feelings
of the heart
or of the senses.

Poetry uses the mind for
language to connect the
feelings.