

Spine Poems

There are two types of spine poems. The first is where you take several books and lay them on top of one another, spines facing outward, and create a poem using the titles on the spines. The other spine poem is a new type of poetry where you write the title of a book or song in a vertical line. That gives the “spine” of the poem you’re about to write. Then, you write your poem (it can be about anything). The beginning of each line must start with the word in the title that’s listed there.

Lesson in Action

The Spine Poem

I was facilitating my first writing workshop with second and third graders, and while they were eager to write poetry and publish a book, I struggled to come up with a plan to get them to write a publishable poem—in one day. I needed to get their skills to match their enthusiasm,

and I needed to do it fast. I needed to build their confidence so they believed without a doubt that they could produce a well-crafted poem that followed the ingredients. I began with a spine poem.

To say the students, working in groups of four, had fun running around the library pulling books off the shelf, shifting them around, and trying to compose poems that made sense, is an understatement. (I’m sure the librarian didn’t have quite as much fun putting the books back on the shelf.) In about 15 minutes, each group composed a poem, shared it with the class, and we were off to a rollicking start. We used this first spine poem as a building block in our workshop, and eventually worked our way up to writing more complex and challenging poems.



**KwameTime
Video for Students**

***Introducing
Spine Poems***

(See page 19.)

POEMS IN THE ATTIC

Poems are sunlight
In our backyard
The light in our
Attic.

—*Kwame Alexander*

So Much Depends Poems

Overview

“The Red Wheelbarrow” is a short four-stanza poem made up of only 17 words. The author, William Carlos Williams, was a family doctor in New Jersey who also wrote poetry. He wanted to write poetry that related to the everyday life of people and was written in plain, straightforward language. Most of the inspiration for his poems came directly from his own observations and experiences.

At first, most students are unimpressed by the work, and the boldest ones express reservations about whether this is really a poem. The genius of this poem is that it cuts to the heart of what poetry is really about—changing the way the reader (and the writer) sees the world. The effect of a good poem can be so powerful that the reader is permanently changed after the reading.

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

—*William Carlos Williams*

THE WHITE CHALK

so much depends
upon

a white piece
of chalk

writing new
knowledge

on the classroom
blackboard.

—*Chris Colderley*

(inspired by William Carlos Williams)

So Much Depends Poems (cont.)

Resource

“The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams

Lesson

1. Using the example of “The Red Wheelbarrow,” challenge students to write their own poems by looking around the classroom and brainstorming items—for example, writing depends on a pencil, reading depends on a book, and games depend on a ball.
2. Have students develop their images by observing and brainstorming what they see: What color is it? What does it do? What is the shape? Where is it located? Once they have recorded about 20 observations, they are ready to begin writing.
3. Tell each student to arrange their phrases in a pattern similar to the original poem.
4. Have students consider adding some poetic techniques, such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, and imagery, to add interest to the final versions.



Sports Poems: Onomatopoeia

Overview

The relationship between poetry and sports goes back to ancient Greece. Pindar, for example, wrote odes in honor of Olympic athletes. In modern times, poets have continued this tradition by celebrating the modern sports of baseball and basketball, to name a few. Sports are filled with many sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures, which make sports a great subject for writing rich poetry.

Resources

- Alexander, K. (2014). *The Crossover*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- “Analysis of Baseball” by May Swenson
- “Casey at the Bat” by Ernest Lawrence Thayer
- “Foul Shot” by Edwin A. Hoey
- “Slam, Dunk, & Hook” by Yusef Komunyakaa

Lesson

1. Begin by reading “Dribbling” by Kwame Alexander.
2. Ask students to identify some of the features that make this poem unique.
 - Alexander uses visual elements to mimic some of the movements from basketball.
 - Alexander repeats the *-ing* sound throughout the poem to create rhythm, much like a bouncing ball.
 - Alexander uses onomatopoeia—words that imitate the sounds they describe—to recreate the atmosphere of basketball.
3. Make a list of words from sports that imitate the sounds they are describing.
4. Have students pick their favorite sports and identify examples of onomatopoeia from those sports.
5. Give students time to draft poems that describe sporting events using onomatopoeia.

Sports Poems: Onomatopoeia (cont.)

6. Students should choose interesting phrases and arrange them—chronologically, top to bottom, left to right, etc.—to highlight aspects of the sports.
7. When they are finished with their drafts, students may add elements to highlight the visual impacts of their poems.

Onomatopoeia Words

bam
bang
bash
boing
boink
bong
bonk
boo
boo-hoo
bump

clap
clip clop
crunch
cuckoo
ding
grunt
guffaw
gurgle
hack
hiss

kerplunk
lub dub
moan
pow
rumble
rush
slap
snort
splash
splish

splosh
swish
thud
thump
ugh
whizz
whoop
whoosh
zing
zoom



Tanka

Overview

In this lesson, students learn about the tanka, a form of Japanese poetry that expands on the haiku form.

Resources

- Alexander, K. (2014). *The Crossover*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “Tanka for Language Arts Class” (212).
- Alexander, K. (2007). *Crush: Love Poems*. Word of Mouth Books.

Lesson

1. Read a sample tanka, such as “Tanka for Language Arts Class” from page 212 in *The Crossover*.
2. Select the words and phrases that are connected to the senses.
3. Use the sensory words and phrases to describe the mood of the tanka.
4. Explain to students that a tanka follows this format:
 - Is 5 lines, 31 syllables (5, 7, 5, 7, 7)
 - Creates a mood with precise sensory words and phrases
 - Includes contemplation and reflection
 - Appeals to as many senses as possible
 - Is written in the present tense
5. Have students use the words and phrases to write sentences about their own chosen topics.
6. Tell them to cross out words that do not help to create clear images.
7. Work with students to write the sentences in five lines like a tanka. Have them count the syllables in each line. Allow time for them to play with the syllables and word choice to match the tanka form.
8. Publish your final copies.

Writing Odes to Common Things

Overview

In “Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes,” Gary Soto shows how important Pablo’s tennis shoes are to him by highlighting details and making interesting comparisons. By using metaphors and similes, Soto makes readers understand just how these tennis shoes are very special.

Lesson

1. List a few everyday common things for which your students are grateful.
2. Have each student pick one of the common things and explain why it’s important to them. Some examples for a pencil include the following:
 - can brainstorm with it
 - love to draw with it
 - able to build structures
 - love sharpening it
 - fun to take notes
 - tap it like a drumstick
 - able to use it as a javelin
 - write ideas and thoughts
 - write poems
 - a cat’s tongue on a stick
 - a craft stick
 - a pointy piece of graphite
 - a scribe of my ideas
 - a telephone pole for the train set
 - a thin drumstick
 - a thin orange mustache
 - a thin orange wand
 - a tree’s grandson
 - a writing tree
 - a yellow dart
 - an arrow
 - lunch for a bored student
 - the top half of a rubber ball
3. Write similes and metaphors describing the object. For example, these could be used in comparisons about pencils:
 - a black paintbrush
 - a book in a stick
4. Have students use the phrases to create their own odes!

Writing Odes to Common Things (cont.)

ODE TO PABLO'S TENNIS SHOES

They wait under Pablo's bed,
 Rain-beaten, sun-beaten,
 A scuff of green
 At their tips
 From when he fell
 In the school yard.
 He fell leaping for a football
 That sailed his way.
 But Pablo fell and got up,
 Green on his shoes,
 With the football
 Out of reach.
 Now it's night.
 Pablo is in bed listening
 To his mother laughing
 To the Mexican *novelas* on TV.
 His shoes, twin pets
 That snuggle his toes,
 Are under the bed.
 He should have bathed,
 But he didn't.
 (Dirt rolls from his palm,
 Blades of grass
 Tumble from his hair.)

He wants to be
 Like his shoes,
 A little dirty
 From the road,
 A little worn
 From racing to the drinking fountain
 A hundred times in one day.
 It takes water
 To make him go,
 And his shoes to get him
 There. He loves his shoes,
 Cloth like a sail,
 Rubber like
 A lifeboat on rough sea.
 Pablo is tired,
 Sinking into the mattress.
 His eyes sting from
 Grass and long words in books.
 He needs eight hours
 Of sleep
 To cool his shoes,
 The tongues hanging
 Out, exhausted.

—Gary Soto