

The N's Read/Write/Slam Poetry Workshop

Objective: To introduce young people to skills they can use both to express themselves through poetry and to deepen their understanding and appreciation of poems written by others.

- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Materials Needed:

For each participant:

- copies of poems from The N's Teen Read Week videos (see Appendix)
- copies of a variety of other poems--for example:
 - “Fog” by Carl Sandburg, available at <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/carlsandburg/fog.shtml>
 - “A Very Short Song” by Dorothy Parker, available at <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/parker/shortsong.shtml>
 - “This Is Just To Say” by William Carlos Williams, available at <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/williams/thisis.shtml>
 - “First Fig” by Edna St. Vincent Millay, available at <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/ednamillay/firstfig.shtml>
- paper and pencil (or pen)

For the group:

- poster paper
- felt-tip markers
- a hat, bag, or bucket holding numbered slips of paper—one for each participant.

I. Introduction – What is a Poem?

Distribute the poems by Shaun and Tyrone featured in The N’s Teen Read Week videos. (Participants can watch and listen to Shaun and Tyrone reading their poems on YALSA’s Teen Read Week website, TK TK TK)

Ask participants what they think makes these poems poems? What’s the difference between poetry and prose? Between a poem and simply talking? Note that there are no right or wrong answers here—the point is to start participants thinking about poetry and about the characteristics of a poem.

The videos of Shaun and Tyrone emphasize various aspects of their poems, including word choice, sound correspondences and rhythm. You may want to prompt participants to become aware of these. They may also notice:

- Rhyming
- Patterns of sound or image
- Repetition

Provide a variety of other poems as examples. (You may want to use Carl Sandburg’s “Fog,” William Carlos Williams’s “This Is Just To Say,” Dorothy Parker’s “A Very Short Song,” and/or Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “First Fig,” all available online.)

Use all these poems to point out specific tools of poetic language, such as:

- Comparisons (*similes & metaphors*)
- Words that begin with the same consonant (*alliteration*)
- Words that include the same vowel sounds (*assonance*)
- Words with similar consonant sounds at the end (*consonance*)
- Reference to another time, work, person, etc. (*allusion*)
- Exaggeration for effect (*hyperbole*)
- Understatement, used to lessen the effect of a statement (*euphemism*)
- Description of a non-human object as if it had human characteristics (*personification*)
- “Pictures” made of words (*imagery*)

On a sheet of poster paper, list examples of these poetic devices from the poems you’ve looked at. How did the poets use the devices? How did they play with language to convey a thought or feeling or image?

The goal of the exercise is to help participants get a sense of the ways that writers use language to create poems—works whose intentional patterns and lyrical qualities distinguish them from prose or speech.

II. Poetry Improv

It’s time to try to make a poem—as a group. The goal of this exercise is to have participants think about poetry beyond simple rhyming verses. It also serves as a warm-up to prepare them for more writing.

Everyone in the group will write one line. But to build some patterns into the poem, all the lines need to have some things in common—so the group needs to make some choices:

- Each line must begin with “I,” “You,” or “We”—which will it be?
- Each line must include either a color, a shape, a sound or a type of weather—which will it be?
- Each line must include either a feeling,, a place or a thing—which will it be?

The group’s three rules are just a beginning—participants can use any of the poetic devices identified in Part I as well. Allow the participants one minute (or less) to write their lines. Then each participant picks a number out of the hat. The participant who gets “1,” writes her line on a big sheet of poster paper as the first line of the poem; the participant who gets “2” writes the second line, and so on. (Return the numbered slips to the hat for use later in the activity.)

When all the lines have been written, analyze the group’s creation the same way the “real” poems were analyzed in Part I.

- What patterns were intentionally built in (because of the rules)? Did these make the composition better, or did they get in the way?
- What patterns have accidentally emerged?
- Did anyone break any of the rules? What effect did that have on the poem, good or bad?
- What poetic devices did participants use in their lines?
- Does the composition make sense? Does it sound good? Does it convey feeling?
- Does the poem feel rhythmically whole? Disjointed?
- Do the participants consider this a poem? Why? Why not? What makes it work as a poem? What’s missing?

Have each participant come up with a title for the composition, then discuss the proposed titles. Why do they differ? Does the composition/poem mean different things to different people? Do participants think that’s acceptable for a poem?

III. The Poetry Challenge

Real poetry is personal—and now it’s time for participants to write their own real poems. From among all the devices discussed so far, have the group collectively choose 5 rules for the poems—a type of word or concept that must be included, a specific phrase, a pattern of sound...

Each participant will write a poem of at least 5 lines. Allow for 10-20 minutes. While a quiet, “thinking” atmosphere may help, some talking is okay, too. Writers may find it fun and inspiring to bounce ideas off each other.

V. Slam Time

Each participant again picks a number out of the hat, this time to determine the order in which they’ll read their poems to the group. Each participant lists numbers down the left

hand side of a piece of paper—from 1 to the highest number in the group. Then after each poem is read, all the other participants rate the poem and performance 1-10.

Once all the poems have been read, collect the scoring sheets and add up the points to determine the winners of the slam. (For more information on Poetry Slams, see “What is a Poetry Slam?” in the Ways to Celebrate section of the Teen Read Week website.)

You may also want to publish all the poems in a booklet or on a web page.

VI. For extended learning

Participants can read, hear and analyze many more poems—as well as meet the poets—online at the [American Academy of Poetry’s Listening Booth](http://www.poets.org/booth) (<http://www.poets.org/booth>).

Additional sites of interest include:

[The Poetry Project: \(http://www.poetryproject.com/links.html\)](http://www.poetryproject.com/links.html),

[Poets and Writers: \(http://www.outloud.pw.org/index.html\)](http://www.outloud.pw.org/index.html),

[The World of Poetry: \(http://www.worldofpoetry.com\)](http://www.worldofpoetry.com),

[The Internet Poetry Archive: \(http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/\)](http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/),

Appendix A: Two poems from The N’s Teen Read Week videos

The Love Poem by Shaun Redwood

I don’t even like love songs, but the right love song
Will make me write love songs about a right done wrong
I like to write fantasy prose, poems of pimping
Because girls only respect when you act cold and distant
If you’re known to listen, you won’t go the distance
Sensitive, considerate- you won’t get enlisted
Teenagers and killers, I do not know the difference
Both have hearts so icy and cold, they’re souls are shivering
So, just to survive I’m somebody I’m not
I feign arrogance hoping somebody will watch
And sure enough they do while I’m acting and maintaining
An image, but it’s a gimmick, I’m sick of the game playing
I’m sick of pretending like I don’t like you just so you’ll like me
It seems the surest way to win although it might be
Time for me to change so here’s the first thing
If I like you I’ll answer your call- and on the first ring!
And that’s my first step toward a mating revolution
Homerooms, classrooms, I’m actively recruiting
Because as it stands now, everything is strange here
Everybody’s posing but really, we’re just plain scared.

Poem, by Tyrone West

See, there's this girl that I know and I know she knows me.
And I like her, but I don't want to rush things, you see?
If I talk about love, she'll get afraid.
She might never talk to me again
She might push me away.
Only see her a little bit during the course of the week
But every time I see her there's a smile upon me.
She got a fresh rhyme style that gets my attention
And if I saw her perform she'd get a standing ovation.
I love it when she walk and the wind blow her hair
That's why I want her to be with me so she can squeeze this teddy bear.
She's beautiful in every way, physically and other ways
I wanna tell her that I love her so we both have better days.

Appendix B:

National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association Language Arts Standards were addressed in these activities.