

“Back When”
Writing About Our Past
by Saraiya Kanning

Grade Level: Middle or High School

Time Frame: 60 minutes

Objective: To consider images and moments of one’s past and how they have shaped or led us, stepping stone by stepping stone, to the present. To use poetry to reflect on the passage of time.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Grade level reading and comprehension

Required Materials: Paper, pencil, “Testimonial” by Rita Dove

Sequence of Activities:

Welcome and Introduction (10-15 minutes)

Literary Model and Discussion (10-20 minutes)

First listen to Rita Dove read “Testimonial”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3uKxkTxXRu4>

Then invite students to read the poem, one student per stanza.

If needed, take time to discuss the words below, and any others the students are unfamiliar with:

Testimonial: A tribute, a celebration. A formal statement testifying to someone's character and qualifications OR a public tribute to someone and to their achievements.

Poplars: A type of tree.

Pirouette: An act of spinning on one foot, typically with the raised foot touching the knee of the supporting leg.

Filigree: Ornamental work of fine (typically gold or silver) wire formed into delicate tracery.

After reading, facilitate an open-ended discussion inspired by the questions below:

What are some of the images and visual descriptions that you heard in this poem?

What do you think the speaker means by “back when”?

What period in their life do you imagine they are referring to?

Share a part of the poem that made you think, gave you pause, or made you curious.

Collaborative Poem (10-15 minutes)

For this activity, the facilitator will ask questions to inspire a flow of creative ideas and will write down student ideas as they are spoken out loud. The facilitator can organize the ideas, ask further questions to elicit more description or specificity, and otherwise direct the overall flow of the poem. The ideas themselves, however, are born of the class.

Instructions to students:

Think of just one moment from your past. Go far in the past. Far enough that you would use the term “back when.” This might be childhood, or you can even use your imagination to invent memories from a time before you could remember infancy, babyhood, days in the womb, days pre-birth. You can make things up. You can be magical. It may be a realistic memory or otherworldly. This could be a moment you find significant, or it could be a moment that has really stuck with you for unknown reasons. Perhaps it’s the visual image, something you remember seeing. Or something you remember feeling, hearing, tasting, or even smelling. Be specific in your description and call upon the power of one or more of your five senses.

Students can have a moment to think and perhaps even write their idea down on paper. Then, as they are ready, they can share out loud and the facilitator can write these ideas down (or type).

For now, the poem can be titled “Back When.”

Individual Writing (10-15 minutes)

Now students write their own poems in this same style. They can use “back when” 1-4 times, but between those statements they should have other types of language describing the moment in more detail. If students struggle with creating specific imagery, call them back to their five senses. What detail can they add regarding seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting?

Some students may want some help brainstorming ideas. Here are some questions to help them:

What memories do you find yourself coming back to, over and over?

Who were you “back when” and who are you now?

How have you changed? How has your life changed?

What were you doing “back when” and what are you doing now?

Write about a moment where you saw incredible beauty.

Write about a moment where you felt incredible joy or sorrow.

Write about a moment where you felt confident or uncertain.

Write about a place you once lived or knew.

What do you know now that you didn’t know “back when”?

NOTE: The students need not worry about copying Rita Dove’s stanza arrangement. The facilitator can talk a bit about stanzas and line breaks, how they might indicate a pause or break in thought. Students are free to break and organize the lines and stanzas as they choose. They can be invited to read the poem out loud to themselves and add line/stanza breaks after writing the entire poem out as well, if time allows. Encourage students to give their poem a title other than “back when” since the collaborative poem already has that title.

Optional Sharing (10 minutes)

Materials and Resources:

Literary Model:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/40129/testimonial>

Testimonial
By Rita Dove

Back when the earth was new
and heaven just a whisper,
back when the names of things
hadn't had time to stick;

back when the smallest breezes
melted summer into autumn,
when all the poplars quivered

sweetly in rank and file . . .

the world called, and I answered.
Each glance ignited to a gaze.
I caught my breath and called that life,
swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet.

I was pirouette and flourish,
I was filigree and flame.
How could I count my blessings
when I didn't know their names?

Back when everything was still to come,
luck leaked out everywhere.
I gave my promise to the world,
and the world followed me here.

More resources:

2 snippets from an interview with Rita Dove:

<https://youtube.com/shorts/EI6EI9o5LGU?si=wh3IOU6uMguKABif>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUakZQq1Ghk>

Another poem by Rita Dove:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51663/dawn-revisited>

Dawn Revisited
By Rita Dove

Imagine you wake up
with a second chance: The blue jay
hawks his pretty wares
and the oak still stands, spreading
glorious shade. If you don't look back,

the future never happens.
How good to rise in sunlight,
in the prodigal smell of biscuits -
eggs and sausage on the grill.
The whole sky is yours

to write on, blown open
to a blank page. Come on,

shake a leg! You'll never know
who's down there, frying those eggs,
if you don't get up and see.