

Erasure Poems, after “N-400 (an erasure)”

by Eva Sierra

Education level: Middle School and High School

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: One hour or less

Objective: Discover and apply the method of found poetry by reading an erasure poem and then creating one.

Prior knowledge and skills: None.

Required materials: Pencil and permanent markers, optionally markers and crayons. Video projection and printed handouts of the literary model. A starter body of text for each student to use for erasure (articles, loose leaf textbook pages, legal documents are all great options).

Literary model: “N-400: an Erasure” by Laurel Chen

Sequence of activities:

Introduction (10 minutes):

Begin by introducing the concept of erasure poetry. I provided the following definition: *Erasure poetry, or blackout poetry, is a form of found poetry created by erasing words from an existing text in prose or verse and framing the result on the page as a poem.*

Explain the different approaches and objectives poets use when creating an erasure. Was it created to prove a point, to make light of a difficult text, to tear down a text you disagree with, to be silly, or simply for the fun of found poetry?

The poem for this lesson is an erasure poem written using the “N-400” form, which is the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services’ Application for Naturalization. Before reading the poem, take a moment to inform students about the process of naturalization to the United States of America. Remind them that there are many steps, appointments, and intricate details that can derail an entire application if not done as precisely as expected. In addition, there are financial strains and difficulties associated with navigating a foreign government’s procedures.

If possible, take a moment to quickly scroll through the N-400 form and its instructions on the board. The most current version is 38 pages of text.

<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/forms/n-400.pdf>

<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/forms/n-400instr.pdf>

As you scroll, remind students that each detail must be filled accurately or else they must

resubmit their application. Also remind students that this is only the application, and that the process of naturalization to the United States can take years.

Next, introduce Laurel Chen, the author. Here is a short bio for Laurel Chen:

Laurel Chen is a poet and migrant worker from Taiwan, currently living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Before watching the video and reading the poem, remind students that erasure poems offer a different feel than other types of poetry. They may notice a choppiness and odd syntax: that is natural to this form of writing. Ask students to pay attention to Lauren Chen's cadence in their performance, and how it helps deliver the message of the poem.

Watch Laurel Chen's 2017 Brave New Voices performance of the poem.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfenkUTJz-0>

Ask students to follow along on their printed copies.

Comprehension and Discussion (15 minutes):

After watching the video, call upon students to share their initial thoughts about the poem and performance.

Next, ask students to share what lines or parts stood out to them. As students raise their hands to answer, invite the class to discuss their thoughts on the line mentioned. Read the entire amendment for that line. Follow up with questions that tie back to the theme and original body of text of this poem. This poem is filled with powerful lines and strong messages, so allow students to share and discuss as many lines as they can naturally bring up. Supplement discussion until every amendment to the poem has been discussed.

Examples: In amendments XI and XII, Chen employs repetition to express frustration.

Or ask students what they think Chen meant in amendment V by "you are what you have abandoned."

Creating an erasure (20+ minutes):

Provide students with the body of text they will be using for their erasure. Since this lesson is flexible for different middle and high school grades, the starting body of text may vary depending on the age group. This lesson was originally used in both a 6th and a 7th grade honors class, and students used single loose pages from a science textbook. Older students may want to use longer texts like articles, legal documents, or long literary excerpts. Older students may also

want to add an objective for their erasure, as discussed earlier in this lesson.

For middle school, I invited students to simply tell a story or to say something interesting using the words on their page. I asked them to aim for 1 to 3 sentences.

I provided examples of the traditional “sharpie” method where chosen text is isolated by surrounding it with black marker, as well as examples that included illustrations and playful ways to isolate the chosen text. I found these from a simple image search for erasure poetry.

Below are the instructions used for this activity:

- 1) Read the contents of your page, paying attention to any words that feel poetic or just stand out to you.*
- 2) Using a pencil, lightly circle or underline words/phrases to create a poem.*
- 3) Once you are happy with your chosen text, begin blacking out the surrounding text. Use markers, colored pencil, crayon, or a combination of these!*

Do not overthink your poem! It might not make perfect sense, and that’s OK! It is part of the beauty of found poetry.

Give students plenty of time to create. They may need longer than 20 minutes.

Sharing (5 minutes):

If students are interested in sharing their work, invite them to share a sentence or two describing their original body of text. Also remind students that this poem may not read as cohesively out loud as a regular poem. Point out the “broken” cadence in Laurel Chen’s performance for inspiration.

Below is the full transcription of the video performance by Laurel Chen:

N-400 (an erasure)

by Laurel Chen

“An erasure poem is derived from crossing out words from an original text to give it another meaning. The “N-400” form, under U.S. Customs and Immigration Services, is the application for foreign-born aliens to Naturalize into the United States.

I, an alien not from U.S. origin, took a sharpie to 36 pages of immigration documents: crossing out the original text, creating an erasure poem in 14 amendments.”

i.

notice: any immigration

notice: hearing

notice: see

notice: you

ii.

to the immigrant:

homeland is

a process

delayed.

iii.

fingerprints disposable

a number unpermitted

immigrants: are

all of the above

iv.

about the United States:

do not

support

the criminal history

v.

you are what you have

abandoned

vi.

identify: alien
copy: self

vii.
separate your
open wounds in the
process

viii.
verify:
all has
been destroyed

ix.
naturalization can not capture
your free
can not level
your personal
for political

x.
this application simplified
is persecution of
your own safety
to ensure social security

xi.
reschedule
reschedule
reschedule
reschedule
a time
time
time
time
time
again time
time
time
date and

time

xii.

resubmit

resubmit

resubmit

xiii.

please

xiv.

you will

never

belong