

Finding Inspiration in Sound

Saraiya Kanning

Grade level: High school

Time frame: 1 hour

Objective: Students will write short poems inspired by sound clips

Prior knowledge and skills: How to write metaphors and similes

Required materials: Paper, pencil, speaker and sound clips (for example, from Spotify or YouTube)

Literary model: None, but note that this lesson works well when paired with [“Calling on Memory,”](#) since some sounds may also inspire memory writing. A poem is included at the end as a closing activity, but it is not used as a model for their writing.

Sequence of activities:

Warm-up (10 minutes):

Lead students in a discussion on the five senses. Ask them to list in order which senses they think they rely upon the most. Then ask them to make a list in order of which senses they think a dog relies on the most. These lists will be educated guesses and may even be somewhat subjective depending on the person and how they think they perceive the world. Ask a few students to share their lists and their rationale.

Then share that for many humans, sight is the dominant sense. For dogs, scent is the dominant sense. Other animals, as well, may rely heavily upon a sense other than vision. But humans are very much visual creatures. If blind, we learn to strengthen our perception through other senses. How would our perception of the world change if our dominant sense was smell or sound? What would we notice in our everyday lives?

In this lesson, we'll close our eyes and switch our dominant mode of sensing to hearing.

Listening Exercise (5 minutes):

Invite everyone to close their eyes. Encourage everyone to be totally silent for this activity, so that they can hear even the smallest of sounds. The low murmur of an AC unit, the breathing of their peers, a car starting in the parking lot outside the window. At first, they should only listen and not write. The instructor can even lead the class in a simple breathing exercise to help them focus, asking students to bring attention to their inhale and exhale. Inhale slowly through the nose. Exhale through the mouth, releasing all air, without rushing.

After 2-3 minutes of solid listening, students should write a list of sounds they observed. Even if they don't know the source of the sound, they can write a description, make a guess as to what it might be, or use a simile to compare the sound to something else (i.e., continuous low groaning like a snoring dragon).

This would be a great exercise to do outdoors, especially if the school has a garden.

Write a Poem Together (10 minutes):

Today's poems will be loosely inspired by the haiku. Instead of syllables, we'll count words. All of our poems today will fit into this simple structure: 3 lines--with 5 words, 7 words, 5 words.

Invite students to share a few of their sound observations from the listening exercise. Pick one of the contributions as the foundation for a collaborative poem. Ask students to brainstorm with you as you find words and narrow the description down to fit into the short form. Emphasize that in this form, every word matters. We are searching for the juiciest words, the stunning images and unique expressions. Try to eliminate unnecessary words like "is." You can also ask them to create a simile in the second line. For an exercise on similes, see the lesson plan "Calling on Memory."

If time allows, make several collaborative poems to build their confidence writing in such a short form.

Individual Poem Writing (20 minutes):

Play a series of sound clips of your choice from Spotify, YouTube, or some other platform you are familiar with. You can even make the noise yourself using instruments or household items. Ask students to close their eyes and imagine a scenario in which they might hear this sound. What's going on in the sound clips? Who or what is making the sound? When? Where? Who else is around? For each sound, they should write a short poem. Allow 5 minutes for each poem. If time allows and they are engaged in the exercises, you can add more sound clips and extend the time.

Do not tell them the source of the sounds. Rather let them use their imagination. Incorporate everyday sounds as well as musical clips. For example:

- a door opening
- hummingbird wings
- wind chimes
- electronic music

Each sound clip is a new poem. Some of their poems may move beyond mere description and begin to hint at a story with elements of setting, characters, and even plot.

Sharing and Closing Poem (15 minutes):

Close the class by inviting students to read their short poems in pairs or as a classroom, depending on comfort level.

If time allows, the instructor can also facilitate a reading and discussion on the sound-inspired poem “The Sound of the Sun” by George Bradley.

The Sound of the Sun

BY [GEORGE BRADLEY](#)

It makes one all right, though you hadn't thought of it,
A sound like the sound of the sky on fire, like Armageddon,
Whistling and crackling, the explosions of sunlight booming
As the huge mass of gas rages into the emptiness around it.
It isn't a sound you are often aware of, though the light speeds
To us in seconds, each dawn leaping easily across a chasm
Of space that swallows the sound of that sphere, but
If you listen closely some morning, when the sun swells
Over the horizon and the world is still and still asleep,
You might hear it, a faint noise so far inside your mind
That it must come from somewhere, from light rushing to darkness,
Energy burning towards entropy, towards a peaceful solution,
Burning brilliantly, spontaneously, in the middle of nowhere,
And you, too, must make a sound that is somewhat like it,
Though that, of course, you have no way of hearing at all.

Sample Student Poems:

Note that some of these don't strictly follow the 5-7-5 form. Use the form as a starting point but allow wiggle room. Adhering to the form too strictly at first can cause paralysis or discouragement. The point is that they write short. Some of these are inspired by a similar poetic form, the lute, which is 5-3-5 (and again you could count words instead of syllables).

Lonely Day

As the cold, wet rain drops fall
The fresh breeze came
For the first time something had
Finally touched my heart

Celebration

Gathered with family and friends
Pop! Boom! Pop!
Full of joy and red
white and blue.

El tigre

Running fast through the forest

I see him
Red eyes and big teeth

Water

A lake in the forest
Close your eyes
Take a swim, you think?

Untitled

I've been lost for hours
Found my way
The croaking guides me home