

“Jabberwocky” in Clay: Making Monsters and Writing About Them

Taylor Johnson

Education level (required): Elementary

Genre (required): Poetry and Art

Time frame (required): 3 sixty-minute class periods, or 2 ninety-minute periods

Objective: To use imagination to ideate an original name for a monster, describe details about it, and create its physical form using clay

Prior knowledge and skills: Manipulating clay into shapes, familiarity with Lewis Carroll’s poem “[Jabberwocky](#)”

Required materials (required): Air dry clay or self-drying clay, popsicle sticks/toothpicks or other shaping/scoring tools, small mixing trays, cups for rinse water for brushes and making slip, non-toxic paints, a variety of sizes of paint brushes (smaller is better), 5” by 5” squares of used cardboard (such as from packing boxes), Elmer’s liquid glue (for possible repairs of dried clay breakage), cleaning materials such as paper towels, sink with soap and water

Literary model: “[Jabberwocky](#)” by Lewis Carroll

Sequence of Activities:

Day 1:

1. 15-60 minutes: Before the students create their own monster, introduce the poem “[Jabberwocky](#)”. Depending on the needs/personality of the group of students/teacher preference, this could be done relatively quickly as inspiration for the student monster ideation step, or it could be introduced as a separate lesson. This [slideshow](#) provides multiple versions of the poem, with different visuals and auditory cues available across videos to help unpack the meaning of the poem and clarify what is happening. You might consider watching all versions, as repetition is helpful. Since “Jabberwocky” uses many nonsense words that nonetheless have meaning, it is helpful to assist the students in unpacking

the plot of the poem and ask them to explain their understanding of who or what the Jabberwocky is. This is the model for their own “monster” creation.

2. 10-15 minutes: Invite the students into a circle and ask them to take turns telling the group aloud about their own ideas for monsters.
3. 15 minutes: After several students have shared, invite them to use paper and pencil to draw their monsters and write about them. You might find it helpful to offer some additional prompts to encourage exploring different dimensions of the monster, especially if the students don’t elaborate on their own.
 - a. What is the monster called?
 - b. What does the monster look like? Describe more about ...
 - c. What does it do?
 - d. What do others do or feel in response to it?
 - e. How does it feel?
 - f. Where does it come from? Where does it live?
 - g. How old is it?
 - h. What does it eat?
 - i. Does it have any special abilities?
4. If there is time, have the students read their writing aloud. Note: If the classroom is equipped with audio recording tools or chart paper, it can be helpful to record student ideas spoken aloud, especially if many of them struggle to get their words or ideas down on paper. Recording and then transcribing audio versions of descriptions of the monsters can be an excellent bridge to support the literacy needs of younger students who have more developed oral skills than orthographic ones.

Day 2:

1. 10 min: Invite the students to revisit their writings about their monsters. Is there anything they would like to change about their monster, such as specific details, or even its name? Discuss.
2. 5 min: Provide the students with access to materials to build their monsters out of clay. Give each student a fist-sized portion of clay (or an equivalent share of whatever amount you have available), a small tray of water, popsicle sticks/toothpicks or other shaping tools you have on hand, and a surface to work on.
3. 5 min: Explain a couple of techniques/guidelines for working with the clay:

- a. Scoring and slip: When joining pieces together, it is helpful to “score” both pieces by scratching the smooth surface of the clay to make it rough in the spot you wish to join the two pieces together, and then add a bit of water or “slip” to the rough spot. Press gently to join the pieces together where they have been scored.
 - b. Center of gravity: Make sure students build their monster in such a way that it is not too-top heavy. Explain that clay is heavy and the thickest parts of the creation need to be at the bottom. If they want to build legs onto their creature, it’s helpful to make sure the legs aren’t too skinny to hold up a huge head. They also should build the monster so that it is standing in whatever way they hope it will stand when finished. (Younger students may have unrealistic expectations about their monster standing when dry after building it lying flat.)
4. 15-20 min: Invite students to work freely on building their monsters. Supervise to help with scoring and adding slip, or helping adjust design features to take into consideration the realistic center of gravity for the piece. Note: It might be helpful to hand out the cardboard squares (to function as stands for each piece) earlier in the process so students can build on top of them. It might also be possible to carefully transfer the finished monsters to the cardboard from the build surface when complete - you’ll have to decide what works best for your particular group of students and your workspace set up.
5. 10-15 min: Invite students to store their finished monsters on a shelf or surface to dry until the next lesson. Provide plenty of time for students to help clean up.

Day 3:

1. 20-25 minutes: When the monsters are dry, which, depending on the material, could be 1-3 days, provide painting supplies. Give each student a paintbrush, a selection of colorful, washable paints (you might find it helpful to place daubs of paint directly on a washable tray) and cups of water to clean their brushes. Have some paper towels or sponges on hand as well to help with cleaning spills. Invite the students to paint their monsters using their wild imaginations. You may also want to invite students to experiment with mixing new colors by combining existing ones. They love playing with color! (There are some wonderful paints for purchase out there - I like Crayola’s washable project paint with glitter!)
2. 5-10 minutes: When the painting process is complete, have the students set the finished monsters to dry again on a shelf.
3. 10-15 minutes: Clean up, leaving plenty of time as necessary for your age group,

your space, and your level of assistance.

4. Note: You may also want to have some Elmer's glue available, in case any of the body parts of the monsters have fallen off during the drying process. (This is more likely to happen if students don't correctly use the slip and scoring method to join pieces or fail to observe the center of gravity design considerations for their monsters. Either way, design is a learning process, and mistakes are okay.)
5. As a follow-up, have students display their monsters alongside their poems or stories and do a gallery walk, show-and-tell, or class open-mic read-aloud. Note: This is a particularly fun activity to do around Halloween, as it gets into the spooky, creepy, or gory themes of the season!

Notes:

For classrooms with 90-minute blocks, combine the steps involving listening to "Jabberwocky" and writing a poem or story with creating the monsters with clay.

You can also have students start with building a monster and then have them write about their monster afterwards - some students benefit from hands-on processes as support for their ideation for writing.

However, given that the clay will need to dry for at least a little while (though air dry clay is much faster), it's better to have the painting process take place on a different day than building the monsters.

If paints are too difficult to clean up for your setting, use air dry clay instead of self-drying clay, and then have students "paint" their monsters using washable markers.

If the painting or coloring process goes quickly, you can also have students share aloud their poems and stories about their monsters on the same day of painting.

Students who finish painting early could also work on typing their handwritten poems on computers if you have a one-to-one classroom, or you could alternately split your class into two groups and have half do the typing while the other half paints and then switch. However, you can adjust these follow-up activities as needed for your own environment and class.

Above all, have so much fun!