

Juan Felipe Herrera's "Papel Picado"

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Education level: All ages

Genre: Poetry, Hybrid

Time frame: 60 minutes

Objective: Creative intuition, playfulness, freedom

Prior knowledge and skills: None

Required materials: Colored paper, glue, scissors, lined paper

Literary model: none

I had the honor of sitting in on the poet Juan Felipe Herrera's class for Poetry Center staff; this "Papel Picado" lesson plan is fully inspired by and lifted from this class. Juan Felipe, with his infinitely warm and welcome spirit, invited our group to grab colored paper from a ream upon walking into the class. Thereafter he led us on a journey that was part arts-and-crafts, part generative writing workshop that he calls "Papel Picado," named after the colorful Mexican paper banners. The exercise was an absolute delight, and I hope to catch a fraction of the whimsy, joy, and celebration that Juan Felipe brings into this exercise.

Keep in mind that he taught this to a group of adults. The beauty of Juan Felipe's lesson plans and approach to collective writing is that they absolutely span the generations. I taught this to middle schoolers but I am absolutely sure this lesson can be used for any age group.

Free write *2 minutes*

I like to start off every session I have with older students (middle school and above) with a free write. I vary the free writes so that some are completely open ended, while others have a small constraint (students must include the color red, or include an image of the sky, etc), or a constraint in form, like writing haikus.

Sometimes I will use the free write as a warmup for that day's lesson. For the papel picado free write I told students they could write about anything they wanted but it had to include five specific words. I gave them a word bank of the following words: honey, shimmer, t-shirt, laugh, and white. I gave students two minutes to write.

Clarify that these words can appear in any order in their writing. They can include a word bank word per line, two words per line, and so on. Freedom is best for this exercise. Tell students they can alter the tenses of the word bank words. Remind students the poem can be as long as they want as long as they include all five words.

Making the Papel Picado *10 minutes*

Fold – Tell students to grab a piece of 8.5" x 11" paper and scissors. Instruct students to fold the paper as follows:

- Holding the paper long ways, fold the top of the paper down to meet the bottom. This is also known as “hamburger style.”
- Fold the now half-sized folded paper hamburger style once more.
- Keep the papel picado folded in this way all throughout the next step.

Cut— Tell students we’re going to cut shapes from our folded paper. Herrera offered some encouragement and suggestions along the way which helped lighten the mood. Feel free to suggest shapes if you’re noticing some resistance or hesitancy. However, a theme of this exercise is freedom and following one’s artistic intuition. Instruct students to listen to their inner child and cut shapes they feel “need” to be cut out of the folded paper.

Words *10 minutes*

In the style of Herrera, fill the space with excitement and playfulness. Encourage students to slowly unfold the papel picado as if it were a surprise, a gift, or even as if it were the sunset, the sky, etc.

Allow students a moment to appreciate the surprising shapes in their papel picado. In his workshop, Herrera asked us to hold up our papel picado to show the class. I think this adds a fun collaborative atmosphere. Feel free to do the same.

Next comes filling our papel picado with words! Herrera had us pick a word category and write all the words we could related to that category on our papel picado. Below are some word category possibilities:

plant words; trashcan words; starry words; magic words; words about family; words you find in the house; healing words; sidewalk words; words you overhear; science words; words you’d find in magazines.

Suggestions and Tips -- Juan Felipe Herrera threw out some gentle suggestions as we wrote. I found them both playful and incredibly helpful. I tried them out with the middle schoolers which helped free the students from their inhibitions. Below are a few of Juan’s suggestions.

- *Think of things you’ve seen on the sidewalk*
- *Words you’d hear someone say*
- *Write twin words*
- *Experiment with writing some of your words large and some small*

Instruct students to pick another word category. After another five to seven minutes tell students to put down their pencils.

Circle – Have students circle their favorite two words and write these two words on the top of their lined paper—this is their poem title. Then have students circle five more words that jump out to them.

Prompt *20 minutes*

Write a poem using these five words.

Share

10 minutes

There you have it! Juan Felipe Herrera's "Papel Picado." Ask students to share their creation at the end of class.