

My shoulder is shimmery, broken pieces of dust

As part of its Writing the Community Program, the Poetry Center hosts an evening for writing residents to meet with participating teachers, make a plan for the semester, and eat delicious catering. The evening also includes a short writing activity, to model a potential class and allow teachers to experience what their students will be experiencing in the program - that is, fun learning poetry. This year, we (Rachel Mindell and TC Tolbert) were asked to present the group writing activity and it turned out to be a hit. Below is the lesson plan with options for adapting it to a variety of classroom situations:

1. We began by introducing ourselves and jumping right into reading a poem, which was also projected on the overhead (something we strongly suggest to engage visual learners and allow all students to see how the poem is placed on the page). We read the poem twice and in between the readings pointed out that we were really interested in the use of sensory detail and figurative language, in order to draw their attention to it.

*Depending on the level of student, you could either excerpt from Maurice Kenny's poem or use a student example below.

**Note from TC about jumping right in: I prefer to do first, explain later. This experiential approach often creates a sense of adventure and exploration, which is crucial in an art form that can be perceived as intimidating or overly serious. So, I tend to get poems out into the air of the classroom as quickly as possible while gently nudging toward what is exciting or cool about the poem I've just shared and then move on to the activity.

Legacy

my face is grass
 color of April rain;
arms, legs are the limbs
 of birch, cedar;
my thoughts are winds
 which blow;
pictures in my mind
 are the climb up hill
 to dream in the sun;
 hawk feathers, and quills
 of porcupine running
 the edge of the stream
 which reflects stories
 of my many mornings
 and the dark faces of night
 mingled with victories
 of dawn and tomorrow;
corn of the fields and squash...

the daughters of my mother
who collect honey
and all the fruits;
meadow and sky are the end of my day,
the stretch of my night
yet the birth of my dust;
my wind is the breath of a fawn
the cry of the cub
the trot of the wolf
whose print covers
the tracks of my feet;
my word, my word,
loaned
legacy, the obligation I hand
to the blood of my flesh
the sinew of the loins
to hold to the sun
and the moon
which direct the river
that carries my song
and the beat of the drum
to the fires of the village
which endures.

-Maurice Kenny

5th Grader Example Poems:

The Pizza is Good To Me

My soul is like chip dip.
My blood is like BBQ sauce
in Texas on a hot Tuesday.
My bones are like cookies.
My toes are like tater tots,
crisp, moist, warm. My heart
is like a game of duck duck
goose. You hope it never stops.
My belly button is like a
button. It just sits there
doing nothing. The end.

Nature

My soul is a beautiful diamond.
My hair is like the

the weeping oak tree. My blood is
fast as the cougar. My bones
are as strong as the huge
bear. My spirit is mighty
as the golden sword. My skin
is as soft as the twin
deer. My teeth are as strong
as the mama bear.
My heart is big like
the moon. My eyes
are as sharp as the eagle
when he's looking for prey.
My brain is like the owls.
My arms are like
a newborn butterfly opening
his wings for the first time.

2. We then asked students to engage in two timed writing exercises, each lasting three minutes. Let them know that these might be used in a collaborative poem later but remind them that these can be anonymous (just don't put your name on it!). Most of all: have fun and once the timer begins, don't stop writing!

- A. Imagine/remember your home. Scan through it in your mind and pick an item in your home that you love/find interesting - describe it in full sensory detail on one half sheet of paper.
- B. Think of a food that is important to your family/culture. Spend some time remembering its flavors, how it is prepared, its smells, what you eat alongside it, etc. In three minutes, write down as many descriptions as you can using full sensory detail on another half sheet of paper.

**Note from Rachel: The categories you choose can vary or you can use a number of them depending on time. In addition to foods and objects, I've also had students describe animals they grew up around (as you'll see in one student example), games they like to play, common phrases in their home, rituals their families practice etc. the idea being that these parts of them become a part of how they might understand their physical bodies.

3. The next part of the activity is called "snowball fight." For this, you simply have the students take the pieces of paper they've written on (they should have two) and crumble them up like snowballs. Then, you yell SNOWBALL FIGHT and start throwing the balls of paper at each other. If you role model the joy in this, students pick it up really quickly. After the balls of paper have been sufficiently tossed about, have students pick up two snowballs (they will hopefully not be their own but it's not a big deal if there is overlap). Snowball fight is a great activity for getting students to exchange work and break up any stagnate energy in the room.

4. We then passed out post-it notes and had students pick out sensory details from the writing exercise to rewrite on a post-it, but without their subject. In other words, they'd just have the description - "slimy like day old apple pie." They can select up to three. By the end of this

section, students should have 3 post it notes with different sensory details or interesting language on them. (Examples: “slimy like day old pie,” “shimmery, broken pieces of dust,” “crispy brown, like dried mud.”)

5. Next, we pulled out a large sheet of butcher paper that had a tracing of TC’s body (we pre-traced for a smoother transition). We asked students to look at the body and, without thinking too hard, just place their sticky notes at random on the body.

6. Once everyone has placed their sticky notes, we went around the room and had students read their collective body poem by saying the name of the body part “is like” the description on the corresponding post it note. For example: “My knee is slimy like day old apple pie.” Or, “My shoulder is shimmery, broken pieces of dust,” or “My heart is crispy brown, like dried mud.”

OBJECTIVES:

Students will experiment with building similes (surprising, strange, and often delightful) which link the physical to sensory descriptions inspired by individual student identity. In this way, students come together as a collective, embracing details from one another’s lives and creating a student “body” that can hold the vibrant beauty and uniqueness of everyone.

EDUCATION LEVEL:

- Can be adapted to fit most ages. TC has had success with this in middle school classes. Rachel has used a basic version of this lesson in 4th and 5th grade classrooms.

GENRE:

Poetry

FORMAT:

Lesson Plan

TIME FRAME:

- 20-50 minutes, depending on class size and how long you have students write and piece the poem together
- If you need to fill time, you could always pull the sticky notes off the body and “revise” the poem to create new versions
- Or, you could have students draw a body on a small sheet of paper and create individual body poems by placing their 3 post it notes in different places

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE/SKILLS:

- Students should be able to name the 5 senses
- It may be helpful, if they are shy or struggling, to make lists of interesting and different sensory words on the board, to jog their imaginations.

REQUIRED MATERIALS:

- 3 Post it notes for each student
- Students need one sheet of paper that has been torn in half
- A large sheet of butcher paper with a body outlined on it (we did this before class/traced TC to prevent any chaos around who will get to be the body, etc)
- Sample poems with excellent sensory detail and figurative language

LITERARY MODEL:

Poem by Maurice Kenny or student example poems