

Lesson Plan
REDACTED: Using Found Texts to Re-Make Meaning
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Grade level: High School, Middle School

Learning Objectives: Engage with creativity and imagination; learn about how to take found text and reclaim and remake meaning

Description: For this lesson, taught with students in juvenile detention, I used the texts in Reginald Dwayne Betts' book *Felon* as a model. *Felon* examines the systemic obstacles of the criminal justice system and their impact on individuals using different forms. One of the forms, he uses is erasure or the redacted poem. In his poems "In Alabama," "In Houston," and "In Missouri," Betts uses official court documents that deal with money bail and redacts them into poems in order to reveal the way that bail impacts those living in poverty. In this lesson, we talk about what it means to redact or erase and students experiment doing their own redactions or erasure poems. This also gives students directly impacted by the system an opportunity to reclaim language that can be very othering and put the power of language back in their hands. We ended up doing this over the course of two sessions but it could be done in one if limited time.

Sequence of Activities:

Introduce Lesson and Discussion of Poems (20 mins)

I put the word **Erasure** on the board and we talk about what it looks like; typically students notice right away that it looks like "erase." Then we talk about the origin of that word. What does it mean to "erase"? To disappear, to get rid of something. We also talk about redaction and the process of redacting.

At this point, I talk about the author of the book who was formerly incarcerated and who is now a published author of many books and a practicing attorney. We look together at the book cover which features art by Titus Kaphar; in these pieces, he has created portraits of formerly incarcerated individuals and then redacted eight percent of their faces.

At this point, we read one or more of the poems "In Alabama," "In Houston," and "In Missouri." We talk about what they notice in the language. My students expressed a deep resonance with the subject matter.

After we've talked about the poem for a bit, we look at excerpts of interviews with Betts about the book and his process (note: students have printed copies).

[From his interview with The Paris Review:](#)

I'm trying to find ways to connect my identity as a lawyer with my identity as a poet. I'm on the board of the Civil Rights Corps, which deals with money bail. They are specifically trying to challenge the fact that

many states incarcerate people and leave them incarcerated just because they can't pay their bail or because they owe fines for traffic tickets or things like that, citations.

But nobody can understand these court documents. I mean, you get sixty to seventy pages. It's like reading a novella, and you don't want to really read a novella that's talking about things like jurisdiction. But what I thought about was this poetry-ness, and if we can find the poetry. Instead of thinking that redaction is a tool to get rid of and hide what is most sensitive, what if we thought about it as a tool to remove the superfluous? What if I tried to find the rhythm, the poetry, the character, the story, the person? If I allowed the document to actually be a voice of the person writing it? That's what I attempted to do.

For me, this says a couple of things. It represents the attempt of the state to physically remove you, but then it also represents the attempt of people to reassert their existence. Those two things get to exist as one. In the same way that these two things are happening, there's this fight against erasure. I think that's what the poems end up mimicking. Even though the portraits on the cover represent that erasure, they also represent the existence of something underneath. It's pushing back against that.

We talk about their impressions of this.

Writing Exercise (30 mins)

Initially, I printed out a vocabulary/glossary list from Pima County Juvenile Court page. The only court documents I could find re: juvenile were about severing from family and that didn't feel appropriate here. I was looking for court documents to use that would relate without directly discussing students' cases. This wouldn't be permitted in class although they could certainly do this with their own documents on their own.

The glossary was a little too much for them to get a grasp on so for the next class session, I brought in another text to work with which was Betts' poem: "For a Bail Denied."

After reading the poem, we discuss it. Then, students work on their own redactions/erasures. I tell them that they have to go with the constraint of not putting words out of order and that they should really shoot for about fifty percent or more elimination and not have phrases or whole sentences from the original together. Some need more coaching on this than others.

Share (10 mins)

Students share what they wrote. I usually go over each time what it is like to be a good listener and a good reader. I ask students what is important when listening (not speaking while someone is reading, having their pencils down and bodies toward the front of the room and eyes on the reader). I ask them what is important when reading (project your voice, hold your paper down so it's not in front of your face and muffles your voice).

Students read and we snap or clap for each person after they read.

Close of Class.

Resources:

Interviews with Reginald Dwayne Betts:

[The Reckoning: An Interview with Reginald Dwayne Betts](#), *The Paris Review*

['Felon' Author Says, 'Everybody Has To Tell Their Kids Something'](#), *NPR*

Book Reviews:

[A Poet and Ex-Con Writes About Life After Prison](#), in *The New York Times* by Carolyn Forché

[REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS'S POETRY AFTER PRISON](#), *The New Yorker*