

## **Rocking a Long Poem: An Eight-Session Residency**

Charlie Buck

EDUCATION LEVEL: Elementary School

GENRE: Poetry/Prose/Painting

TIME FRAME: 8 hours

MATERIALS: Paper and pencils, paint, clay, rocks

LITERARY MODEL: *Everybody Needs a Rock* by Byrd Baylor

In this residency first and second graders had the opportunity to build one poem over seven or eight sessions, and to experience the ways sustained attention deepened their relationship with a subject. Though I'd planned to use a different Byrd Baylor book each class as the prompt, the response to the first book was so strong that we stuck with its subject matter: rocks.

This overview might give ideas on how to structure linked classes exploring one subject.

### **Session 1: "Rules for Finding a Rock"**

We talked about Byrd Baylor's life and passions, and read *Everybody Needs a Rock*, with a focus on the narrator's ten rules for finding a rock. I handed out rocks and index cards, and students wrote their own rules for finding rocks, and shared them:

*Go by yourself. Pick a rock you can spend time with. Feel it and keep its secret.*

I assigned homework: Finding their own rocks.

### **Session 2: "Autobiography of a Rock"**

I took in examples of metamorphic, igneous and sedimentary rock, and passed them around as we talked about how they were formed, and how much time it might take.

Then I led a rock-forming meditation: students doubled over on the floor, eyes shut, fists clenched. I encouraged them to tighten even more, clamping their teeth together to feel hardness, letting that denseness spread throughout their bodies. I spoke about the forces of pressure and heat. I used a spray water bottle to talk about erosion and chemical rains. It would be great to do earthquakes (they could tumble to a new spot) and volcanic explosions, rocks being flung and flowing, hissing when they hit water. I banged on a pot: the weather was terrible! After millions of years life forms emerged and began slithering over them.

Energized and intrigued, they returned to their seats to write personal histories of the rocks they'd brought in (each week I brought loaner rocks for kids who had forgotten their own). I gave each student an index card and asked them to write about how their rocks were formed, from the rocks point of view. On the board I wrote a sample first line: "Millions of years ago, I

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*1,200,4100 years ago a volcano exploded and threw you in the ocean.*

*I started as an asteroid, tossed, tumbled, crash! I landed on Earth.*

*A lake made me, but I was found in the desert.*

This class went extremely well: inspired, they wrote a lot. It reminded me that time spent warming up is rarely wasted.

At the end of class a student asked, “Can we do this all again next week?”

### **Session 3: “Portrait of a Rock”**

The class was eager to forge ahead: the next session they were sitting waiting for me with their rocks, several just harvested from the playground. They shared how they came by their rocks. We dipped rocks in water to see if the color changed. I asked what colors they saw, and highlighted responses that came from close looking.

I passed out oversized index cards and asked them to draw their rocks on the unlined side, blowing up their drawing to at least the size of their hand. I walked around picking up cards to show interesting drawings and examples of enlarging. The classroom teacher dotted out primary colors of acrylic paint onto plastic lids and handed out paintbrushes, and they began painting their drawings. The paintings were gorgeous, each one unique and unusual, and it seemed a good time to talk about plagiarism: how it can be tempting to use a great word or idea someone at your table comes up with, but it’s always more interesting and surprising and satisfying to come up with your own words and images.



As students finished they placed their paintings on the rug, and stood murmuring appreciation of each other’s work. I remarked on their concentration and how many specific details they noticed, and told them those skills would come in handy during our next class.



#### **Session 4: “Rough as a Chin”**

We doubled down on similes. I asked them to touch their rock and call out what it felt like: rough, pokey, silky, etc.

I wrote all of their textures on the board, and then added “as a” or “like” after each texture, explaining that when you use like or as to compare two things, it’s a simile. We did a few as a class.

Then they wrote individual similes on the flip side of the index card with their painting:

*Crumbly as a cookie.*

*Cold as Colorado.*

*Smooth like a mirror.*

*Sharp as crystal shards.*

They read their similes as their rock was being passed around, and there was much student-to-student acknowledgement: “Wow, this rock really is as spiky as a spear!”

#### **Session 5: “Rockstar: Visiting Poet!”**

I enjoy inviting visiting artists into my residencies: it’s energizing for all of us. With each interaction I learn more about engaging students.

The poet Elizabeth Brown read one of her pieces, and talked about how she wrote it. She shared her appreciation of mystery in poems, and said figurative language like similes and metaphors make writing come alive. Students shared a few of their similes from the previous session.

We talked about metaphor: comparing their rock to something different, that in some way reminds them of a quality of their rock.

Because these were first and second graders, I had a worksheet a few sentences long, just to get the ball rolling:

My rock is a \_\_\_\_\_

You remind me of \_\_\_\_\_

Students shared freshly coined metaphors:

*It reminds me of Valentine’s and makes me feel shy.*

*Her right side is a map for termite tunnels.*

*You remind me of a heart, or a shark’s tooth, or a mountain.*

*It reminds me of a fish swimming.*

Elizabeth said, “These may not be exactly true, but they are good comparisons, and it makes people listen more closely and use their imaginations when they hear your poem.”

At the end of class a few students gathered around Elizabeth to chat, poet to poet.

### **Session 6: “Odes and Geodes”**

This class was a good reminder that when you are doing something in a class for the first time, it would be wise to practice at home first.

A vender at the gem show gave me an unopened geode, and I passed it around as we guessed what it looked like inside, and talked about how it was formed: water evaporating and leaving mineral deposits inside the rock. I brought a jeweler’s saw, a regular saw, a small vice and a variety of hammers, and they speculated about which might work the best for opening the geode. We then tried every single thing: to their delight, nothing worked.

We went outside and threw the geode on the sidewalk: nothing.

My partner hauled in a sledgehammer. We wrapped the geode in a towel and he smashed the sledgehammer down, missing the geode: so much laughter! A second try: finally, success, though the geode was pulverized. It was stuffed with tiny crystals and everyone got a few. They were delighted, but it had taken a great deal more time than budgeted, leaving little time for odes.

Instead I quickly found a list on the internet, Things You Can Learn From a Tree, read it out loud, and asked them to jot down what they could learn from their rock, or what advice their rock might give them. Only ten minutes of class were left, but somehow writing happened:

*Be yourself, be different! Wait for your BIG moment!*

*Be dark. Be strong. Live long.*

*Be inevitable.*

*Don’t judge a rock by its cover!*

### **Session 7: “An Unwelcome Diversion”**

We had been focusing on rocks for many weeks, and I thought they could use a break. I congratulated them on all the previous weeks of work, and announced that today we would not be writing about rocks!

They groaned, palpably disappointed. I gave a great prompt about celebrations, nobody liked it, and class dragged.

BUT I’d typed up all the writing each student had done about their rocks: rules, autobiography, similes and metaphors, advice, all on one page. Giving up on the celebration prompt, I passed these out instead. For the first time they saw all of their writing, and seemed surprised and pleased with both the length and contents of these drafts.

On their own they started editing: crossing words out, drawing arrows where they thought lines should be moved, correcting my misinterpretations of their wacky spelling, adding words. I encouraged this and asked them for titles.

(The next time a class is editing their poems, I will try cutting them up and handing them out in a baggy, to underscore how mutable a poem is: they can assemble one fresh on the spot. It might be fun for them to trade lines, or to edit someone else's poem.)

### **Session 8: "Grand Finale"**

I brought in corrected drafts for a last look, to make sure I'd written their name the way they liked it, and that they were okay with the lineation of the poem.

Matts Myhrman, 87, and his partner, Dee Miller, were our final guest artists. Matts was a contemporary of Byrd Baylor's, a pioneer of straw bale building in this area, a geologist and anthropologist exploring clays and glazes used in the low-fired vessels that have been made in this part of Arizona for thousands of years. Adventurous and curious, he liked to figure out how to do things for minimum cost and maximum fun: a good match for the classroom.

Matts explained the processes by which rocks become gravel, sand, and clay. He advised that while playing in mud puddles, we should take time to notice if the mud around the puddle is cracking: that means it will hold its form and is good to collect and work with. He explained how the first peoples built and fired pots. Matts and Dee demonstrated how to make pinch pots and coiled pots.

Students made pots with clay generously donated by potter Randy O'Brian, who fired the resulting work, which was returned to students after their final reading at the Poetry Center.

Matts passed away a few months later. I feel lucky to have watched this inspired educator in action.

### **Conclusion:**

The final poems from this residency were beautiful. Here are a few examples:

Kiera Thorkelson

#### **Dot**

Wet

    Cold as snow

        Hard as ice

It looks like a popsicle

It's beautiful

like three light pieces of glass

It smells damp

It feels like mud

It feels like a flower

*"I was under water,  
I have been in sand,  
underwater again,  
then back in the sand.  
I wish I was back in water  
because I am dirty"*

White as a crystal

It reminds me of Valentine's  
and makes me feel shy

Crystal, so beautiful that

I had to make a poem for you

Brody Evans

### **Best Bro**

Oh, Best Bro!

1,200,4100 years ago  
a volcano exploded  
and threw you in the ocean

You turned into obsidian  
The obsidian was alive!

Smooth as a donut  
Black as the void  
Heavy as 50 soldier ants

Foxy, boxy,  
with two triangles on top  
Best Bro went in the portal  
and made a creation

Feel it and  
Keep its secret

Cerulean Sternberg

### **Bunbun**

After the rain  
(or at raining time)

you can see crystal structures  
(so pick one!)

Pick a rock you can spend time with  
I found mine under the solar panels  
in the playground  
(when the bell was about to ring!)

Rumple as wet paper  
Shiny in spots  
Slippery as a soap bar  
It smells like a newborn

Hold it for a long, long time  
You might feel calm

Grey as a storm cloud  
(also silver, crystal white, pink,  
orange, gold, yellow, blue)  
You remind me of a split raindrop

Started as an asteroid, tossed, tumbled  
*Crash!* Landed on earth.  
Crumbled apart.

You are going to be here *forever*.  
You make me feel protected.  
You make me want to jump and fly!



Having one focus enabled students to accrue a poem deepened by their sustained curiosity and inventiveness. Creating prompts within the scaffolding of a theme gave this residency a structure and momentum we all benefited from. I hope to experience more residencies like this in the future.