

# What We Carry: Poeming the Concrete and the Abstract, the Literal and the Metaphorical

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**Grade level:** High School, Middle School

**Learning Objectives:** Engage with creativity and imagination; learn about concrete/abstract word choice and the power of metaphor in writing

**Description:** For this lesson, I used, as a foundation, [Wang Ping's "Things We Carry on the Sea" \(Here is a printable version\)](#). Ping's poem explores what immigrants carry when they travel so this lesson can work on many levels: both as an illustration of concrete/abstract word choice and metaphor *and* as a way to talk about home, landscape, and the challenges facing immigrants. I've taught this lesson with both middle schoolers and high schoolers with success.

## Sequence of Activities:

### Introduce Lesson and Discussion of Poem (20 mins)

Since the form of this poem is a list, I begin by talking about lists. On the Board: What do we use lists for? What is their function? (to organize our ideas, to know what to do or what to buy at the store, to remember). We talk about the use of repetition.

I also introduce the concepts we will explore using the poem.

On the board:

**Concrete:** something you can experience with the senses (this table, this dry erase board, your shirt).

**Abstract:** something that is more of an idea and a concept and cannot be experienced physically (emotions, love, anger, hardship).

**Metaphor:** comparing two unlike things to make meaning.  
His hair was a flame (his hair was bright red or orange).

I pass out the poems, and we look first at the title. I ask students what they think it means: "Things We Carry on the Sea." Then we read the poem twice. A student volunteer reads it once and then, before the second volunteer reads, I ask students to underline or circle words or phrases that catch their attention.

We begin by talking about the words and phrases that stood out to them. Then, I ask them to look for things that are concrete, abstract, or both. For example, when she writes "we carry yesterday, today, and tomorrow," the people are not *actually* carrying those but by that she means that they carry memories of the past, where they are now, and dreams for the future. When she writes "We carry tears in our eyes," she means literal tears but she could also be using this as a metaphor to discuss the sadness of saying goodbye to family.

I like to work in the content and themes as we go through. Who is the “we” she is talking about? If they say, anyone, I ask them to look a little closer, who is it that she is describing. Usually some student will say immigrants. Why would an immigrant be sad to say goodbye to family? Are they leaving on a short trip or is there a chance they’ll never see their family again?

I like to bring attention to the part of the poem where she includes words in several different languages. I ask why she would make that choice. How does it contribute to the overall message of the poem?

Once we are done talking about meaning in the poem and breaking down individual lines, we move onto the writing.

### **Writing Exercise (30 mins)**

Depending on the class dynamic, the writing can either be done collaboratively or as individuals or both.

Even if they are writing their own poems, I usually have us do a little collaborative writing so they feel more confident. In the last class where I taught this, I was working with middle schoolers in juvenile detention, so we defined the “we” of the poem as kids in the detention facility. We did both “we carry” (what is it you carry, physically, psychically and emotionally?) and “we set down” (what do you want to let go of or leave behind?).

Here’s an excerpt of what they wrote together:

We carry court  
We carry feelings of anger and isolation  
We carry staff  
We carry faith  
We carry schoolwork  
We carry hopes  
We carry each other  
We carry dreams of a new life  
We carry a sense of mind  
We carry regrets  
We carry boundaries  
We carry toothbrushes  
We carry pencils  
We carry everything we need in this world

We set down rules  
We set down relationships  
We set down anger  
We set down negative thoughts  
We set down hatred  
We set down detention

We set down negative emotions  
We set down what we've been sinning for

I read what we came up with together to affirm how everyone's ideas link and what a good job they did. Then, I have the students identify a group they are a part of to be the "we" (kids in the U.S., their family, artists, etc.)

**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.*