There Once Was a Poem that Knew Facts:
The Unlikely Love Affair
Between Poetry and Nonfiction

presented by
Allan Wolf

Description:

One part poetry across-the-curriculum, one part text-to-text connection, and three parts fun, this wildly entertaining session will explore what happens when Nonfiction and Poetry meet by chance and fall madly in love.

About Allan Wolf:

Allan Wolf is a performance poet and author of poetry picture books like The Blood-Hungry Spleen and young adult verse novels such as New Found Land (Candlewick Press), an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults. Two of his books have been named School Library Journal Best Books of the Year, including Immersed in Verse: An Informative, Slightly Irreverent & Totally Tremendous Guide to Living the Poet’s Life (Lark/Sterling). His latest titles include an interactive book for young writers titled One Hundred Haiku to Write and Leave Behind (Lark/Sterling), a young adult verse novel titled Zane’s Trace (Candlewick Press), and the soon-to-be released More Than Friends: Poems from Him and Her (Boyds Mills) co-authored with Sara Holbrook. Wolf lives in Asheville, NC.

NOTE:

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There Once Was a Poem that Knew Facts:
The Unlikely Love Affair Between Poetry and Nonfiction

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Why Poetry?

- Poetry encourages the word play that builds vocabulary and fluency.
- Writing poetry helps writers find their individual voices.
- Reading and writing poetry teaches precise word choice.
- Poetry is fun—and involves students with language.
- Poetry offers concentrated, language-rich, quick-read texts that can augment any existing content lesson.
- Poetry is part of most learning standards and assessment testing in Communication Arts.
- Poetry builds students phonemic awareness and sense of rhythm in language.
- Mastery of language devices commonly found in poetry (repetition, internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, refrain, pattern, sequencing, active word choice, etc) empower students with the widest possible range of writing tools to execute all writing tasks.

Why Performance Poetry?

- Performance poetry encourages repetition and memorization which enables even the most reluctant students to internalize language.
- Performance poetry allows students to move through progressively deeper levels of understanding, as they make meaning through direct authentic experience with the text.
- Through ensemble work and performer/audience interaction, performance poetry provides natural opportunities for collaboration, community building, and purposeful, student-centered learning.
- Performance poetry accommodates (and celebrates) multiple learning styles as defined by Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences.
- Performance poetry can be used as an alternative assessment tool to determine students’ competency and understanding (of vocabulary, meaning, context, or other specified concepts).
- Performance poetry allows even non-readers and emergent readers to successfully demonstrate a mastery of language and understanding of meaning.
Play With Poetic Structure

Don’t be afraid to let our words play on the page. Let them line up like soldiers on parade. Let them dash down stairs. Let them fall fast and crash on the grass. Or skip from rock to rock across a stream. To emphasize a word, make it live alone on its very own line. Add stanza breaks or dashes to make the reader stop. Play with punctuation. Ellipses make the words trail off. Parenthesis add afterthought to a sly aside. Indent a line to expand on the thought of the line that came before. Let your words build and explode. Let them linger in the air. Let them slink away slowly till they are barely even there.

from *Immersed In Verse* by Allan Wolf (Lark Books, 2006).

Note the author’s use of poetic language (rhyme, rhythm, assonance, consonance, personification, etc.) in the nonfiction prose above. Prose and poetry share much in common.
Don’t Be Afraid

to let your words
play on the page.
Let them line up
like soldiers on parade.

Let them dash
down stairs.
Let them fall
fast and
CRASH on the grasssssss.

Or skip from rock to rock across a stream.

To emphasize a word, make it live
alone
on its very own line.
Add stanza breaks

or dashes to make the reader—stop.
Play with punctuation:
Ellipses make the words trail off . . .
Parentheses add afterthought (to a sly aside).
Indent a line
to expand on the thought
of the line that came before.

Let your words build and explode!

them in air.
Let linger the

Let them slink away
slowly
till they’re barely even there.

Note how this “poem” still relays the same information as the prose form. In fact, verse allows the text to actually demonstrate the concepts it is attempting to explain.
Poems that Celebrate the Mundane

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends upon

a red wheel barrow

glazed with rain water

beside the white chickens.

William Carlos Williams

Dust of Snow

The way a crow Shook down on me The dust of snow From a hemlock tree Has given my heart A change of mood And saved some part Of a day I had rued.

Emily Dickinson

Hamburger Haiku

Fast food Happy Meal. Everybody is happy. Except for the cow.

Allan Wolf

Fog

The fog comes on little cat feet. It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches and then moves on.

Carl Sandburg
Functional Poems (or Content Poems)
Didactic poems that teach specifics

METRICAL FEET
Lesson for a Boy

Trochee | trips from | long to | short;
From | long to | long in | solemn | sort
Slow | Spondee | stalks; | strong | foot, | yet | ill able
Ever to | come up with | Dactyl | tri | syllable
Iamb | ics march | from short | to long;
With a leap | and a bound | the swift | An | apests throng.

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

A SIMILE IS LIKE A SONG

A simile is like a song,
It’s as easy to remember.
A metaphor makes soft white snow
sifted sugar in December.
A little alliteration
lets the lesson lilt and linger.
A rake that’s been personified
scrapes its bony fingers.
Hyperbole exaggerates:
“Her crying caused a flood!”
Onomatopoeia imitates:
“Kabany, Kerpunk, Kathud!”
Before You Rhyme,
Please Take The Time
To Read These Wise Didactic Lines

The *masculine* is bright and light.
The *feminine* is brighten, lighten.
*Triple* rhyme is brightening, lightening.
*Forced* rhyme to the ear is frightening.

*External* rhyme comes at the end.
*Internal* brightens light within.
“Within and end don’t rhyme,” you say.
But that’s the way some poets play:
The *perfect* rhyme sounds right on time;
The *near* rhyme, though, is not quite home.

Unless your aim’s the funny bone
Best leave the *multi*-rhymes alone.
The reason multies humor us is
They batter us like blunderbusses.

Beware young poets. Take your time.
Lighten, brighten, light or bright;
Don’t use a word because it rhymes;
Choose a word because it’s right.

*Allan Wolf*
Expository Poems (or Subject Poems)
Non-didactic poems that celebrate generalities

**Arithmetic**
*by Carl Sandburg*

Arithmetic is where numbers fly like pigeons in and out of your head.
Arithmetic tells you how many you lose or win if you know how many you had before you lost or won.
Arithmetic is seven eleven all good children go to heaven—or five six bundle of sticks.
Arithmetic is numbers you squeeze from your head to your hand to your pencil to your paper till you get the answer.
Arithmetic is where the answer is right and everything is nice and you can look out of the window and see the blue sky—or the answer is wrong and you have to start all over and try again and see how it comes out this time.
If you take a number and double it and double it again and then double it a few more times, the number gets bigger and bigger and goes higher and higher and only arithmetic can tell you what the number is when you decide to quit doubling.
Arithmetic is where you have to multiply—and you carry the multiplication table in your head and hope you won't lose it.
If you have two animal crackers, one good and one bad, and you eat one and a striped zebra with streaks all over him eats the other, how many animal crackers will you have if somebody offers you five six seven and you say No no no and you say Nay nay nay and you say Nix nix nix?
If you ask your mother for one fried egg for breakfast and she gives you two fried eggs and you eat both of them, who is better in arithmetic, you or your mother?

**And don’t forget:**

*Math Lesson.* From *Upside Down and Inside Out* by Bobbi Katz (Boyds Mills Press, 1992)
Persona Poems (or Monologue Poems)

Use them to assess reading comprehension

Persona Poems / Monologue Poems . . .

• offer a student-centered approach to learning.
• lend themselves to performance and presentation.
• are handy content memorization tools.
• reinforce audience awareness.
• place young perf-poets in the role of teacher by intrinsically asking, “What do I want my audience to learn?”
• help students to organize, prioritize, and categorize content.
• require close reading of any primary texts.
• encourage the use of specialized vocabulary in context.
• encourage text-to-self connections.
• promote independent, supplementary research.
• are useful across the curriculum.
• provide a fun, engaging, and authentic way to assess learning.
Private Patrick Gass, the Carpenter,  
Makes His Case to Lewis and Clark

Welcome to Fort Kaskaskia, Sirs.  
I know that you’ve had a rough journey thus far,  
and I know that you have plenty soldiers to see  
so I thank you for taking the time to see me.  
Now Captain Bissell claims he can’t spare me  
but with all due respect I’d like to plead my case.

Do I have any special skills?

Well, I’m a right handy carpenter.  
With the proper tools and a few hands  
I can clear you a field of trees in a week  
and build you a cabin to boot.  
Give me a broadax and a hewing dog  
and I’ll square the logs if you choose.  
Give me a froe  
and I’ll build you a clapboard roof.  
Give me a wedge and a maul  
and I’ll split a hundred rails in a day.  
I can saddle notch a log  
or make a saddle for your horse.  
Or a bed for to lay on or a bench for to sit on.  
I know the ins and outs of raising a fort  
which I know you’ll be needin’ up north  
and with your permission, sirs, I’ve an idea or two  
to expand the capabilities of your keelboat.  
I can row and push a setting pole.  
I can shoot a gun and throw a hawk.  
I can swim like a fish. I can run like the devil.  
I’m strong and I’m fit.  
I’m a soldier’s soldier, Sirs.  
I never shirk and I do my work.  
And I do the other feller’s too.

What’s that? Why do I want to join?

I mainly . . . Mainly, I want to see the trees.

from New Found Land: Lewis and Clark’s Voyage of Discovery by Allan Wolf.  
Candlewick Press (Cambridge, 2004), pp 77-78.
Non-Fiction Text transformed into a Persona Poems / Monologue Poem

Poet is asked to read the text carefully then write a first-person character poem using present tense and titling the poem after the speaker.

The Green Basilisk Lizard

The green basilisk lizard is also called a plumed or double-crested basilisk; but its amazing ability to run on water gives this species its most recognizable moniker: the Jesus Christ lizard.

Abundant in the tropical rain forests of Central America, from southern Mexico to Panama, green basilisks spend much of their time in the trees and are never far from a body of water. When threatened, they can drop from a tree into the water and sprint, upright, about 5 feet (1.5 meters) per second across the surface.

To accomplish this, they have long toes on their rear feet with fringes of skin that unfurl in the water, increasing surface area. As they rapidly churn their legs, they slap their splayed feet hard against the water, creating a tiny air pocket that keeps them from sinking, provided they maintain their speed. They can move along the surface like this for 15 feet (4.5 meters) or more. When gravity eventually does take over, the basilisk resorts to its excellent swimming skills to continue its flight.

Part of the iguana family, green basilisks grow to about 2 feet (61 centimeters) in length, including their long, whip-like tail. Males have distinctive, high crests on their heads and backs, which they use to impress females.

Pregnant females prepare a shallow trench where they lay up to 20 eggs. The mother then leaves the eggs to hatch on their own. Hatchlings are born with the ability to run (on land and water), climb, and swim.

Green basilisks are omnivores, surviving on a diet of plant material, insects, fruit, and small vertebrates. They are common throughout their range and have no special status, but abundant natural predators like snakes and birds keep these amazing lizards on their toes.

National Geographic Website
Basilisk
*by Simon Wolf*

I am a green basilisk
sleeping on a rock in a Central American
rain forest next to a pool.
Eee-ee-ee-eeck!
The shrill cry of a hawk rents the still air
like a knife wakening me.
I stay stock still
not daring even to breathe.
But the hawk’s sharp eye still spots me.
As it dives I jump up
my strong hind legs granting me speed
as I scamper towards the water. A searing pain
shoots up my tail as the hawk’s curved beak
clips it. Finally I reach the water’s edge
and jump into it. For a moment I am engulfed
by cold clear water then I bob up like a cork.
I put one foot on the surface and push,
my foot flaps opening.
The water goes up to my ankle but I swing
my other leg in a smooth downward
arc and don’t sink. The hawk is still hard
on my bleeding tail. Solid ground is only
four feet away. Three now. Two. One.
Now I’m on dry land in the shelter of the ferns.
The hawk lets out an agonized skree
and flies off.
I
am
safe.
Mystery Poem

Write a “Who Am I?” or a “What Am I?” poem in which the speaker only gives descriptive clues to the reader who must guess who, or what, the speaker is. This answer can be given as part of the poem’s ending or not at all. The poem can take whatever form you choose.

Examples

The Mountain Chicken

I’m called the Mountain Chicken but I never, ever cluck.
You’ll find me in Dominica if you have any luck.
I do not peck. I do not scratch. My name must be a joke.
I do not strut. Instead I hop. I do not cluck. I croak.
Don’t look inside the chicken coop. I’m underneath this log.
I’m really not a chicken, see I really am a . . .

Metaphors

I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils,
O red fruit, ivory, vine timbers!
This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising.
Money’s new-minted in this fat purse.
I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there’s no getting off.

Sylvia Plath

Who Am I?

I played a sport, Round Ball the game.
I flew through the air, and all knew my name.
To the greatest heights, I did reach,
When playing with the dream, this—no one could teach.
The size of the ball did change but once,
And to the larger did I return.
From fame and glory did I retire,
Wearing red and black attire.
Who am I?

P.J. Purdy and Tammy Roberts

Riddle

We are little airy creatures,
All of different voice and features:
One of us in glass is set,
One of us is found in jet,
One of us is set in tin,
One a lump of gold within;
If the last you should pursue,
It can never fly from you.

Author unknown
Limerick

A limerick is a five-line poem, usually humorous in nature, arranged in a A-A-B-B-A rhyme pattern. Lines one and two consist of eight or nine syllables. Lines three and four consist of five or six syllables. The last line (which rhymes with the first two) consists of from eight to ten syllables. Limericks can be used to tell brief stories or to describe the characteristics of something being studied in class.

Examples

Biology

A chameleon when he’s feeling blue,
Can alter his glum point of view.
By changing his hue
To a color that’s new:
I’d like to do that, wouldn’t you?

_Eve Merriam_

Ecology/Social Issues

Said an envious, erudite ermine:
“There’s one thing I cannot determine:
When a man wears my coat,
He’s a person of note.
While _I’m_ but a species of vermin!”

_Oliver Hereford_

Sammy

There was a young hopeful named Sam
Who loved diving into the jam.
When his mother said, “Sammy!
Don’t make yourself jammy.”
He said, “You’re too late ma, I am.”

_Elizabeth Ripley_

Physics

There was a young lady named Bright,
Whose speed was much faster than light.
She went out one day
In a relative way
And returned on the previous night.

_A.H. Reginald Butler_
Diamante

The diamante (pronounced DIE-uh-MON-tay) is a perfect poem form to illustrate the contrast between two different subjects. The seven lines of this poem are in the shape of a diamond, with the different subjects acting as the top and bottom points of the diamond.

Line One: Noun “A.”
Line Two: Two adjectives describing the noun “A.”
Line Three: Three “ing” or “ed” words describing noun “A.”
Line Four: Four nouns. Two describing the noun “A”. Two describing noun “B.”
Line Five: Three “ing” or “ed” words describing noun “B.”
Line Six: Two adjectives describing the noun “B.”
Line Seven: Noun “B”

Note that immediately after writing Noun “A” in line one, the writer may want to go to line seven and enter the contrasting noun “B” there. Then the writer can go back and fill in the rest of the poem.

Examples

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Younger, easier
Old friends, one teacher, one class
Bonner, Holly Hill Elementary / Holly Hill Junior High, Campbell
Changing classes, changing teachers, finding new friends
Older, harder
JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Group Poem, 6th graders
Bonner Elementary School

DEMOCRACY
Many, representative
Self-governed, elected, tolerating
Legislature, constitution / despotism, absolutism
Inherited, exploiting, oppressing
Machiavellian, single
AUTOCRACY

Group Poem, 11th graders
Spruce Creek Senior High

Note: I picked up these diamante examples from an unknown presenter to whom I owe thanks.
(Diamante continued)

You can adapt the diamante to reinforce vocabulary or concepts that you have been studying in any content area.

**Adapted for Earth Science**

Line one: Write the word “SWAMP.”
Line two: Write the names of two famous swamps.
Line three: Three words that describe swamp geography or climate.
Line four: Name a swamp plant, a swamp animal, a desert plant, a desert animal.
Line five: Three words that describe desert geography or climate.
Line six: Write the names of two famous deserts.
Line seven: Write the word “DESERT.”

**Example**

```
SWAMP
Okefenokee, Everglades
wet, spongy, low-lying
fern, egret / cactus, lizard
hot, dry, sandy
Sahara, Mojave
DESERT
```

**Adapted for Environmental Science**

Line one: Write the word “POLLUTION.”
Line two: Write two adjectives which describe pollution.
Line three: Three verbs which tell how humankind pollutes the earth.
Line four: Two specific examples of pollution / Two specific examples of conservation.
Line five: Three verbs which tell how humankind conserves the earth.
Line six: Write two adjectives which describe conservation.
Line seven: Write the word “CONSERVATION.”

**Example**

```
POLLUTION
foul, noisy
stripping, exhausting, contaminating
clear cutting, dumping poisonous chemicals / treating wastes, banning dioxin
recycling, replenishing, preserving
clear, unspoiled
CONSERVATION
```
Cinquain

A cinquain (pronounced SEEN-cane) is a five-line unrhymed poem. It is easy to write and can be used in a variety of subject areas. Cinquains can be useful in helping students to gain new insights into a topic being studied. Although there are variations, the cinquain generally takes the following form:

Line One: *One noun* that introduces the poem’s subject.
Line Two: *Two adjectives* that describe the subject.
Line Three: *Three verbs* (or verbals) related to the subject.
Line Four: *Four-word phrase* telling feelings of the writer or describing the subject.
Line Five: *One noun* (different from line one) that sums up the previous four lines.

Examples

**Spiders**
Tiny, busy
Spinning, moving, floating
Building fragile wispy nests
Artists

**Tree frogs**
Brown, glistening
Prowling, leaping, hanging
Stretching throats to sing
Woodsprites

**Jennings and Telfer**

**Grackles**
Iridescent, black
Splashing, hopping, dunking
Fluttering feathered creek communion
Bath time

**Allan Wolf**

The Unlikely Love Affair Between Poetry and Nonfiction
Allanwolf.com
Acrostic Poem

An acrostic (pronounced uh-CRAW-stick) poem is an easy way for students to summarize what they know about a topic by gathering together thoughts, facts, ideas, and details into a poem in which the first letters of each line spell out the topic at hand. Add an extra degree of difficulty to this form, by also arranging the last letters of each line so that they spell out a word or phrase that is appropriate to the topic.

Examples

Wishing for freedom
Haughty look in your eyes
Isolated in your too-small space
Tundra dweller
Ermine-colored
Furry and fuzzy
Out of place in a St. Louis summer
Tremely quiet

Joy Ray

Forgotten Giants

Ancient
Bogs
Contain
Dinosaur
Eggs,
Forgotten
Giants
Hidden
Inside
Jurassic
Kingdoms.

Like
Memories
Never
Opened,
Prehistoric
Quagmires
Retain
Secrets.

This
Unknown,
Vanished
World,
X-tinct:

Yesterday’s
Zoo.

Avis Harley

Abecedarian
from Avis Harley’s
excellent book titled
Fly With Poetry: An
ABC of Poetry
(Wordsong/Boyd’s
Mills Press).

by Avis Harley

At last,” cried Butterfly,

Poised
Over its
Empty chrysalis,
“My final draft!”

Avis Harley

This
Unknown,
Vanished
World,
X-tinct:

Yesterday’s
Zoo.

Abecedarian
by Avis Harley
Tanka Talk:

Students create a classroom dialectic in verse by writing tankas (5 lines of 5,7,5, 7, and 7 syllables respectively) about a variety of topics (shopping, sorrow, hair, victory, cars, friendship, peer pressure, anger, math, a historical figure, a scientific fact, etc)

Depression is not
a sour look on my face.
Looks are a symptom
that my heart is deflated,
trust and hope have gone missing.
S.H

Depression is not
my voice becoming silent.
My silence is a symptom
of the look on your face,
Trust? Hope? Missing all along.
A.W.

Fun is a giggle,
pink lipstick, blue nail polish,
whispering girlfriends,
a good cry at a movie
then laughing all the way home.
S.H.

Fun is a joy ride,
a spitting competition
telling raunchy jokes
laughing till our stomachs ache
knowing that we all belong.
A.W.

Underwear in brief:
Mostly equipped with front flaps;
Underoos; jock straps;
Low-rise; boxer; bikini;
Jumbo or teeny-weeny.
A.W.
Multi-Voice Poem

Write a two-voice poem, *a la* Paul Fleischman’s *Joyful Noise*. Perhaps a conversation between two (or more) speakers. Your two voices can speak simultaneously or alternate, passing the lines back and forth.

Example  (from *Math Talk: Mathematical Ideas in Poems for Two Voices* by Theoni Pappas, see bibliography.)

**One**

One. I was the first of them.
The numbers that is. The numbers that is.
I was the initiator.
Counting and computation started with me.
One Every number One
Every number has me as a factor.
I can multiply any number and amazingly leave it unchanged.
One that’s me.
I can divide any number you name it
and leave it the same.
And when you think you’ve reached the end of the numbers,
just add me to the last and the list goes on.
I’m number one, the first.

One
The Bio-Poem

The Bio-Poem is a formulaic “paint-by-numbers” poem that is typically autobiographical though it can easily be adapted to explore historical figures, places, events or literary characters.

Subject’s First Name
Who is . . . (list three adjectives)
Daughter/Son of . . . (or Father/Mother of . . .)
Lover of . . . (list three)
Who feels . . . (list three feelings)
Who needs . . . (list three)
Who fears . . . (etc)
Who gives . . . (and so on)
Who would like to see . . . (and so forth)
Resident of . . . (place where subject lives)
Subject’s Last Name

The “I Am” Poem

A formulaic “paint-by-numbers” poem that, like the Bio-Poem is typically autobiographical though it can easily be adapted in the same way. The “I Am” Poem is a little more sophisticated and it’s use of refrain gives it more of a poetic quality.

Title is Subject’s Full Name

I am . . . (phrase that sums up who you are)
I wonder . . .
I hear . . .
I see . . .
I want . . .
I am . . . (repeat of first line)

I pretend . . .
I touch . . .
I worry that/about . . .
I cry . . .
I am . . . (repeat of first line)

I understand . . .
I say, “ . . . ” (something actually spoken)
I dream . . .
I try to . . .
I hope . . .
I am (repeat of first line)
Bio-Poem Examples

Seventh Grade Student

Molly
Who is energetic, creative, athletic and short.
Daughter of Sandra and John.
Lover of fun, marine life, and John.
Who feels pessimistic, left out, and sometimes happy.
Who needs love, time, and hugs.
Who fears sharks, death, and homework.
Who gives friendship, advice, and love.
Who would like to see a cure for cancer, Alaska, and my parents back together.
Resident of Mount Air.

McDonald

Character from Literature

Queeny
Angry, defiant, bright, frightened
Daughter of a prison inmate
Cares deeply about her mom and dad
Who feels alone
Who needs someone to see through her defenses
Who gives friendship to those who believe in her
Who fears going to jail
Who would like to see her father
Resident of Cotton Junction, Georgia

Peavy

Historical Figure

Abe
Strong, brooding, witty, compassionate
Husband of Mary Todd Lincoln
Cares deeply about saving the Union
Who feels committed to ending slavery
Who needs the nation’s understanding
Who gives freely of himself
Who fears war
Who would like to see North and South as one again
Resident of the ages

Lincoln
Bio-Poem Character from Poetry

Sammy
Naughty, happy, hungry, and sly
Son of Mommy
Lover of fun, jam, and mom
Who feels motivated, happy, and guilt-free
Who needs jam, bread, and a chair to stand on
Who gives headaches, grief, and hugs
Who would like to see his mommy happy
and a swimming pool filled with jam.
Resident of The Kitchen

Jaminsky

“I Am” Poem Character from Poetry

Mommy of Sammy by Elizabeth Ripley

I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.
I wonder why my son can’t stay out of trouble.
I hear huge lips smacking in the kitchen.
I see mounds of jam everywhere.
I want a vacation!
I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.

I pretend not to find my child annoying.
I touch my child’s sticky sweet face.
I worry that he will wipe his face on my new curtains.
I cry to think he won’t be a child forever.
I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.

I understand that children will make messes.
I say, Sammy! Don’t make yourself jammy.
(I say, I’m thankful that we’ve food to eat at all.)
I dream of the day that Sammy becomes self-cleaning.
I try to remember that this is just a phase.
I hope when I am old, my son will clean up after me.
I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.

Two poems based on Sammy by Elizabeth Ripley

Both of these poems—one a “Bio Poem,” the other an “I Am Poem”—show how poem forms can be used to assess how well students understand literary characters or historical figures. The “bio poem” and “I am poem” also make excellent pre-performance character studies for students who may be acting out a character from literature or poetry.
**Where I’m From Writing Prompt**

This student-centered writing activity also builds community by allowing students to share who they are with one another in a strikingly poetic way.

**Step One:**

Students write “Where I’m From” at the top of their paper. Tell them they will be writing about where they are from, either now or in the past.

**Step Two:**

Have students generate lists of the following:

- Familiar sights, sounds, and smells of their home and neighborhood.
- Familiar foods, especially those associated with holidays, birthdays, and other celebrations.
- Familiar sayings and expressions overheard in and around the place where they grew up.
- Other details: Relatives’ names, Church experiences, common objects, street names, hiding places, plants growing in the yard, etc.

**Step Three:**

Share “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon with the students. For this activity I like to place the poem’s text on an overhead so we’re all looking at the same copy. Have two or three students take turns reading the poem aloud.

**Step Four:**

If there’s time, I like to discuss with students why George Ella Lyon’s words are so recognizable as a poem. If possible, divide students into discussion groups before sharing as a whole class. Notice that this type of student-centered discussion allows the young poets to begin to define poetry using their own terminology and based upon whatever prior knowledge they happen to bring with them to class.
What makes “Where I’m From” a poem?

- repetition (of the “I am from” phrase).
- Unexpected substitution of a location with sensory images. We typically think of ourselves as being from a place, not objects (clothes pins), sayings (perk up and pipe down), or food (fried corn and strong coffee).
- Creating a montage of images that combine to create an impression that no linear narrative can match.
- Language that appeals to the senses. The reader can taste the beet-flavored dirt, see grandfathers missing finger, and hear the bible verses.
- She uses the proper names of things: forsythia, Dutch elm, Imogene and Alafar, and carbon-tetrachloride. Poets recognize and celebrate the natural music created by a thing’s proper name.
- Musical language in phrases such as “sift of lost faces,” “long gone limbs,” “Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.”
- The lines turn intentionally whether “end stopped” or “run on,” and the words that hang along the poem’s right margin are all very strong and visual.

Step Five:

Read Lyon’s original poem once more. If possible, share a student example or two from another class. Explain to your students that we are each “from” more than just a place. We are from all those memories and details that have shaped us into what we have become. The “where” of George Ella Lyon’s poem is much more than a city or town.

Step Six:

Instruct your young writers to create their own poems or rich narratives using Lyon’s poem as a model. By using Lyon’s poem as a model, young writers will be practicing many effective poetic devices that will shape their memories into poetry. You’ll be amazed with the strong imagistic language that results and the interest shown during sharing as students discover new details about one another’s histories.

SHARING IDEA:

If you don’t have time to share every poem, you can have each student read his or her favorite detail aloud. The effect is a montage of memories and sensory images that simultaneously celebrate each student’s uniqueness and the whole group’s diversity.
Where I’m From
by George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride,
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I’m from fudge and eyeglasses,
    from Imogene and Alafair.
I’m from the know-it alls
    and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I’m from He restoreth my soul
    with a cottonball lamb
    and ten verses I can say myself.

I’m from Artemus and Billie’s Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments—
snapped before I budded—
leaf-fall from the family tree.

From WHERE I’M FROM, WHERE POEMS COME FROM by George Ella Lyon.
(Absey & Company, 1999)
Groups Can Do a Where We’re From Piece

Where We’re From

We’re from The Pod.
We’re from smelly bathrooms
and great food
   salads, mac ‘n cheese,
   and brown bag lunches
   with slushies

We’re from homework, recess
from Art paintings
and “Turn the TV to Channel Ten.”

We’re from Miss Howard, Miss Clark,
Peebles and Gaffney,
from screams, laughs, bells and beeps.

We are from the Pod.

Fourth Grade
Wakefield Elementary
Raleigh, NC

We're From SDS

We are from SDS.
We are from hard pencils and crinkly papers.
From overhead projectors and pencil shavings
and homeroom tables, green, red and blue.
We are from Clorox wipes and hand sanitizer
We're from "Shhhhh!"
We're from "Please put up the privacy shields."
From holidays: Christmas, Easter, and Summer.
From golden crispy corn dogs
and Pappa John's pizza one Friday a month.
From the Seniors’ courtyard:
padded used-to-be fountain,
the band banging out Jazz.
We are from SDS.

Fourth graders
Spartanburg Day School
Spartanburg, SC
NonFiction Meets Poetry:

Titles of Some of the Poems I Shared

*Something Is Going to Happen* (from *Delight*) by Robert Penn Warren

*The Road Not Taken; Dust of Snow* by Robert Frost

*The Red Wheelbarrow; This Is Just to Say* by William Carlos Williams

*Fog* by Carl Sandburg; *Miracles* by Walt Whitman

From *Immersed In Verse: An Informative, Slightly Irreverent & Totally Tremendous Guide to Living the Poet’s Life* by Allan Wolf

- *The Red Wheelbarrow* by William Carlos Williams
- *Write About A Radish* by Karla Kuskin
- *Don’t Be Afraid* by Allan Wolf
- *Hamburger Haiku* by Allan Wolf
- *A Simile Is Like a Song* Author Unknown
- *Where I’m From* by George Ella Lyon

From *The Blood-Hungry Spleen and Other Poems About Our Parts* by Allan Wolf

- *Bone Chart*
- *You Can’t Beat Your Heart*
- *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Your Knees and Elbows*
- *etc.*

From *New Found Land* by Allan Wolf

- *Sgt. Patrick Gass, The Carpenter*

Other poems I might have shared:

- *Arithmetic* by Carl Sandburg
- *Math Lesson* by Bobbi Katz

**BOOKS I REFERENCED**


A (Very) Limited Bibliography of “NonFiction” Poetry

Note: These titles are just to get you going. There are plenty more, but a handout can only be so long before it turns into a book!

Animals


Emotions, Self-Esteem


History


**Math**

Pappas, Theoni. *Math Talk: Mathematical Ideas in Poems for Two Voices.* San Carlos,
_________. *Math Appeal: Mind-Stretching Math Riddles.* New York: Scholastic Press,
2003.

**Nature, Earth and Life Sciences**

1985.

**Reading/Writing/Grammar Instruction**

Katz, Bobbi. *Poems Just For Us with Cross Curriculum Activities.* New York: Scholastic
Willen, Jennifer. *70 Wonderful Word Family Poems: A Delightful Collection of Fun-To-

**Riddles**

Franco, Betsy. *100 Riddle Poems for Pocket Charts.* New York: Scholastic Professional
Smith, William Jay and Carol Ra, eds. *Behind the King’s Kitchen: A Roster of Rhyming
School


Seasons, Holidays, Months


Sports
