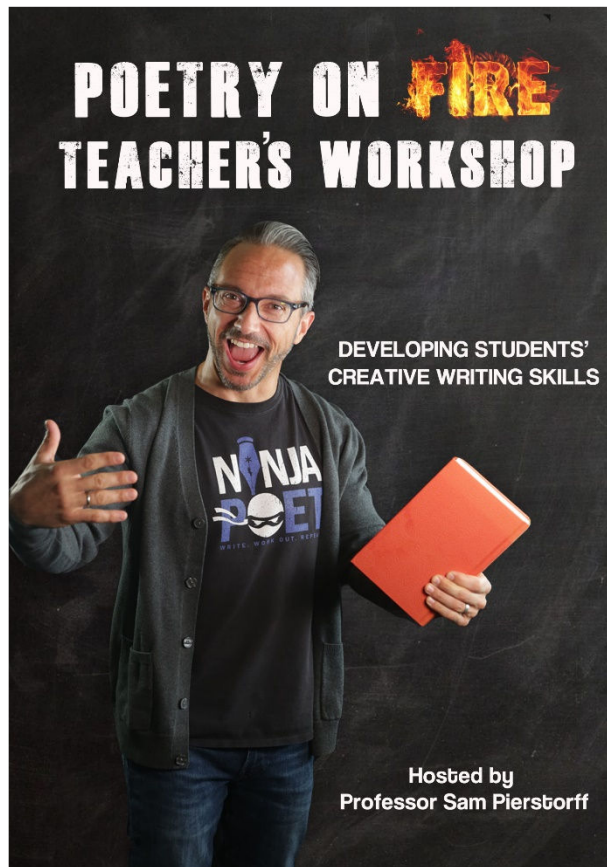




POETRY ON FIRE TEACHER'S WORKSHOP BY SAM PIERSTORFF



LESSON PLAN

To order this and other programs call:
(888) 570-5400; (310) 839-1500

www.epfmedia.com

SYNOPSIS

Poetry has been a powerful vehicle to get students to open up and speak their truths, to share their world views, and to build an unbreakable bond with their peers. Two activities are presented in this program that have worked very well in many classrooms and writing workshops: 1) An “Emotion Card Pre-Writing Activity” that quickly and easily demonstrates how a poem needs to “show not tell” and 2) a “Letter Poem” activity that will lead students toward a longer, more powerful, full-length poem. By integrating these easy-to-use classroom activities, the conversation around poetry and its use and purpose will fundamentally change for the better and students’ voices will be heard loud and clear, and poetry will be less intimidating to teach and a lot more enjoyable and essential for students to write.

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT: POETRY ON FIRE TEACHER’S WORKSHOP

As a community college professor of poetry for 20 years, I have led countless writing workshops and teacher trainings for middle school and high school faculty, and the complaint I hear most often is how difficult it is to teach poetry. In fact, many admit to avoiding poetry altogether or quickly skimming the required unit. There are a couple reasons for this. One reason is that students simply get bored with Shakespeare and Donne because the language is archaic and, from a student’s point of view, these poems feel impossible to understand. Therefore, it’s hard to get students excited about poetry. In addition, another complaint I often hear from English teachers who want to update their reading lists and expose students to newer, more entertaining, culturally and politically relevant, and inspiring poetry is the lack of poetic examples—or at least classroom-friendly examples. It’s hard to teach contemporary poetry when your own exposure is limited to the centuries-old Anglo-Saxon literary canon.

In my experience, however, poetry has been a powerful vehicle to get students to open up and speak their truths, to share their worldviews, and to build an unbreakable bond with their peers. It is in this spirit that I wanted to showcase some of the most dynamic and accomplished spoken word poets in the country and ask them to share their advice on writing and performing. Their poems are edgy and authentic and their voices are contemporary and engaging. In other words, students will tune in and, hopefully, be inspired to write their own poems. In order to facilitate that goal, I have created two distinct activities that have worked very well in many classrooms and writing workshops: (1.) An “Emotion Card Pre-Writing Activity” that quickly and easily demonstrates how a poem needs to “show not tell” and (2.) a “Letter Poem” activity that will lead students toward a longer, more powerful, full-length poem similar to the poems expressed by the professional poets showcased here.

By integrating these easy-to-use classroom activities, the conversation around poetry and its use and purpose will fundamentally change for the better and students’ voices will be heard loud and clear, and poetry, I promise, will be less intimidating to teach and a lot more enjoyable (and essential) for students to write.

RULES FOR WRITING:

1. **“Anything is poetry.”** This means that poems don’t have to rhyme or be limited to a finite set of topics. Poems don’t have to be formatted in specific ways or be “deep.” Poems can quite literally be about anything! Yes, anything.
2. **“Write what you know.”** This is a common saying among creative writers and teachers. It’s important to understand that writers don’t have to be overly sophisticated or complicated or find difficult subjects that need to be researched. The lives we have already lived—every skinned knee, break up, or bad job—become the fodder for many great poems. From the simplest to the most complex moments in life, a poet’s job is to find meaning in the moments all around them, and those are the things we know best and are worth writing about.
3. **“Show Don’t Tell.”** This is arguably the most oft-repeated and important “rule” of all writing. Using details and specific language to render images instead of just telling a readers what to think and feel is paramount to great writing.

EMOTION CARDS: WRITING ACTIVITY

SCRIPT FOR TEACHERS (*Modify as needed*):

For this activity, you will receive one "EMOTION" card. Once you get your card, read the emotion. Think back to a time recently or in your childhood when you felt this emotion. Try to focus on just ONE memory—the hottest one—the one that pops into your mind first even if it doesn't *feel* right now like a very big deal. If no memory emerges, write a scene or describe an experience that reflects your “emotion.”

Now, begin to write freely in your journal about the emotion on your card. Recall a specific time. Recall the details of that moment: the clothing people wore, the smells in the air, the setting, the feelings in your stomach. Concentrate on the details first and write those.

Do NOT focus on writing your feelings. Focus on capturing the details of the moment. Was it Christmas morning? Were you in your princess pajamas as you tumbled down the stairs? (EXCITEMENT). Was it a homeless person wearing garbage bag pants and a thick gray beard that you remember? (PITY). Is it your best friend's new BMW and recent trip to Hawaii that she keeps talking about? (ENVY). Focus on the details of the story, and write. The "feelings" will be drawn out by the details if you do it right. I promise.

Schedule:

- 5 minutes to explain
- 10 minutes to write (solo)
- 5 minutes to pair & share with peer
- 10 minutes to share with the class (volunteers)

**ANGER/
HATE**

**SADNESS/
GRIEF**

**HAPPINESS/
JOY**

**ANXIETY/
NERVOUSNESS**

**FEAR/
AFRAID**

**DISGUST/
REVULSION**

<p>PITY/ SYMPATHY</p>	<p>ENVY/ JEALOUSY</p>
<p>GUILT/ SHAME</p>	<p>LOVE/ LUST</p>
<p>ANTICIPATION/ EXCITEMENT</p>	<p>SELF-DOUBT/ UNCERTAINTY</p>

LETTER (EPISTOLARY) POEMS

Why?

We are all closet voyeurs, drawn to open windows, rubberneckers when we see an accident, eavesdroppers on hallway conversations. There's something exciting about overhearing something or opening a diary that you didn't write. Poems can also have the similar ability to draw in a reader. Imagine writing a letter to someone or something, but the irony is that it's meant for the whole world to read (and learn from). That's the idea behind open letters. They can be cathartic, venting, angry, hilarious or deeply moving.

What?

Don't write a letter to your mother for all her hard work raising you. That's too predictable and obvious and the Hallmark card aisle is full of that already. Instead write a letter to the chair that holds you up night after night as you struggle with a new poem or write a letter to the engine in the automobile that sputters and gags but still gets you to your class on time. What about the man on the bus who smells like too much Old Spice or the young lady in a convertible who cut you off in traffic? Don't these folks deserve letters as well?

Examples:

Share sample letter poems like McDaniel's "Letter to the Woman who Stopped Writing Me Back, Koertge's "Dear Superman," Pierstorff's "Dear Death," Sharon Olds' "To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty."

Share McSweeney's Open Letters "Titles." Examples: "An Open Letter to The Victoria Secrets Catalog," "An Open Letter to My Anorexia," "An Open Letter to Truckers who Honk at Me on the Highway because I'm a Woman," "An Open Letter to My Ex-Boyfriend's Mother," "An Open Letter to Jif Peanut Butter," etc.

(<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/columns/open-letters-to-people-or-entities-who-are-unlikely-to-respond>)

Beginning:

1. *Make a list of 5-10 possible letters.*

Ex: "A Letter to the Student who earned an 89.5% and begs me in an email for an A"

Ex: "A Letter to My 8th Grade Self"

Ex: "A Letter to the woman in the 10 items or less line with 25 items"

Ex: "A Letter to Breast Cancer"

Ex: "A Letter to My Future Wife"

2. *Share list with 3-5 peers*

3. *Share 1-2 with class*

Middle:

1. *Now select your most interesting and begin. Start your letter. Be honest, be clever, be creative. I will stop you in about 10 minutes.*

End:

1. Swap papers and share with one peer.

2. Offer critiques, new direction, etc.

3. Find "best" poem and read aloud. Offer commentary/critique.

4. Return to original poem to write more/revise or begin with a new title.

*Alternatively, you may simply ask students what makes them angry and then ask them to treat that "thing" like a person and write a letter directly to it. This direct treatment of a subject in a letter-writing format create an immediate audience and purpose and it almost "gamifies" writing in a way that will allow students to tackle some heavy subject matter in a lighter way, but you will see how quickly they explore that anger in very deep ways.

TEACHING TIPS & TRICKS

The workshop curriculum explored here is actually quite simple. What is complex, however, is the sort of attitude and vibe necessary to cultivate a sense of fun, freedom, and focus amongst the students. Here is a list of tips for creating this atmosphere:

1. Allow them to write whatever they want within the parameters of the assigned task (no swearing or put downs to other students).
2. Assert that this is not an assignment. There is no page length, and it does not have to rhyme.
3. Tell them you believe they are all powerful creative people, and that as young people they are closer to creativity than most adults, and have unique perspectives on the world often times wiser than adults.
4. Let them be weird. Ask them to take risks and write things they have always wanted to say.
5. Have fun with them. If you, as the poetry facilitator, are not having a good time, they will not have a good time either. Spoken word poetry is about them using their personal voice. This is a freeing experience and can only occur under full free will. If the kids are not having fun, they will not exercise free will.
6. Let them decide a few of the poem topics.
7. During the brainstorming session, do not let them get away with obvious metaphors and similes.
8. Students are amazing at metaphor and simile if you tease it out of them.
9. Let this be a safe space. No one will get in trouble for what they write.
10. Keep your energy high. This requires a lot of enthusiasm on your part. If it is not authentic, the kids will know instantly and will become totally disinterested.

To find your enthusiasm, look up spoken word artists on *YouTube*. Start with Rudy Francisco, Taylor Mali, Mike Mcgee, Sarah Kay, Joyce Lee, Neil Hilborn, Queen D, Joaquin Zihuatanejo, Jaz Sufi, Brandon Melendez, and go from there. Numerous other poets will pop up on the side bar. Explore and find what moves you. This will be the beacon of your enthusiasm and the spark to ignite the students. Also, this will give you an idea of how a spoken word poem differs from a page poem.

Once you have shared the instructions for the Emotion Card Activity and/or the Letter Poem task, consider using the following format to establish rapport in the classroom and to help students understand that they are part of a larger writing community:

THINK/WRITE (10 minutes):

- Ask students to think and write independently for at least 10 minutes.
- You should also jot down some notes or a whole piece of your own.
- Students really value when teachers also do what they assign.
- Writing alongside students lends credibility to the instruction and makes you more empathetic to the challenges writers face when confronted with a blank page.

SHARE (10 minutes):

- Once done writing independently, let students share with a partner (or partners).
- They can choose to read their work aloud or exchange papers.
- Students should ask others what they liked or what they may need to add to develop their topic.
- After students have shared in small groups, ask for volunteers to read aloud to the whole class.
- If needed, bribe them with candy or extra credit, but neither will likely be needed.

PERFORMING (The Day After: 45 minutes):

- Ask students to take their poems home, revise them as needed to add ideas or length or details, and perform them aloud in the mirror or to their family.
- Focus on clarity, emotion, and annunciation.
- Poems DO NOT have to be memorized, but students should know their poems well enough to maintain good eye contact with their audience.
- Some students will desire to perform and others may need a little incentive. Try to allow a time in the school day (about 30-45 minutes) where all students can read or “slam” their poems while others listen and react with enthusiasm.
- Encourage applause and polite shows of appreciation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

- *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* – by Kim Addonizio & Dorianne Laux
- *A Poetry Handbook* – by Mary Oliver
- *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* – Edited by Billy Collins
- *Stand Up Poetry: An Expanded Anthology* – Edited by Charles Harper Webb
- *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets* – by Ted Kooser

Online Resources

- *Poetry Foundation*: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>
- *Poetry in America (PBS)*: <https://www.pbs.org/show/poetry-in-america/>
- *Poets & Writers*: <https://www.pw.org/>
- *Button Poetry*: <https://www.youtube.com/c/ButtonPoetry>
- *Write About Now*: <https://www.youtube.com/c/WANpoetry/videos>

Contact

For inquiries, please contact:
EPF Media
(888) 570-5400; (310) 839-1500
info@epfmedia.com

Copyright. The Study Guide is owned by EPF Media. You may use the Study Guide solely for personal or educational, non-commercial use, and you may download or print any portion of the Study Guide solely for personal or educational, non-commercial use, provided you do not remove the copyright or other notice from such Content. No other use is permitted without prior written permission of EPF Media.