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A Poem Mix Tape for Road Trips

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with inspiration from
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826michigan

GRADES 7-9

TYPE
POETRY

COMMITMENT
1 SESSION: 90
MINUTES EACH

Poems come from all places and transport us to all places, and usually, the poems that jar us most take us somewhere totally unexpected. In this workshop, we think about where to start and how to make connections between all the points on the journey of writing a poem. Through a zigzag of interruptions to our writing (some planned, some spontaneous), we'll arrive at strange (but satisfying!) places to end our poems. By the end of the day, we'll have poems that serve as a kind of roadmap, but we'll still expect many surprises.

This lesson plan was developed through conversation with a poet and scholar I deeply admire, Rachel Feder, who taught wildly fun and hilarious poetry workshops for 826michigan. Rachel's workshops felt like the best kind of journeys because of the genuine joy and playfulness she used to structure activities. Rachel's exercises always seemed to ask, What if writing poetry could be fun and spontaneous, like games? And what if that game-like spirit opened us up as writers to discoveries both serious and profound? And what if, through revision, we apply

the careful thoughtfulness we apply to making someone the ultimate mix tape, weaving the strange, profound, silly, uplifting, and somber together for the ride of a lifetime? Is it all possible? Indeed, it was and is, and we saw it happen again and again through Rachel’s poetry games.

We originally based this lesson around multiple music and poetry games — students listening to classical music and transcribing their thoughts and feelings onto sheet music, for example, or having someone play live music in response to a poem. But in the end, just a few of the games — the ones that don’t require live musicians — worked best.

SESSION:

In this lesson, students will use free writes, writing games, cheesy pop lyrics, and a new pair and share revision strategy to think about where to start and how to make connections between all the points on our journey of writing a poem.

YOU WILL NEED

- Note cards or scraps of paper
- Sample/model poems
 - Optional: Copies of Dean Young’s poem “Luciferin”
 - Optional: Copies of Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art”
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Optional: Copies of Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking”

- Print-outs or projections of lyrics to cheesy pop love songs or power ballads
 - Optional: Copies of Bryan Adams’ “(Everything I Do) I Do It for You”, written by Bryan Adams, Michael Kamen, and Robert John Lange
 - Optional: Copies of Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On”, written by Will Jennings
- Writing paper and pencils
- Highlighters
- If possible: ELMO-type projector and a timer

HOW TO BEGIN (10-15 MINUTES)

I started with student and teacher introductions — a very short free write or sketch — about the strangest road trip we have ever been on, giving the caveat that one needn’t have traveled far to have had an interesting time.

Here’s the prompt: Describe the time you met someone new on the way to the corner store, or about the cross-country trek your family took last summer. From that, students circle and share one golden detail aloud — a word or two that evokes a strong feeling or that the students feel are closely tied to the memory of their journey. They write this detail on a notecard, which I collect and save for later.

STEP 1 (5-7 MINUTES)

Brainstorming and Discussion

Then, I ask students to describe how writing poetry is like a journey. Through this conversation, we usually end up finding a few important connections, which we write on the board.

Here are some that we've brainstormed:

- Certain components have to be in place (company, appropriate supplies, open mind, heart)
- Often, the actual destination is unknown
- Pit stops and detours usually become the most important parts
- Poems end somewhere different than where we start
- Both contain interesting zigzags and bring us to new and satisfying places

It's with this, the poetry roadtrip theory, that we read and write poems in this session.

STEP 2 (25-30 MINUTES)

Model Texts

I like to start with a poem by Dean Young, which we read all together. I give a little context about the writer, a contemporary American poet, living and writing now.

There are many other great poems that could work here. I have used "Luciferin" a few times; it does contain an expletive and somewhat violent images (although, when I warned students about the language, one high school student reassured me they could handle it since, "We live in the real world").

Once I've read my chosen poem aloud, in small groups, I ask students to discuss and decide:

- Where does it start?
- Where does it end?
- Where are the shifts or turn?
- Where do the sidetracks really start?

Groups share their findings aloud with the larger group, and there's usually some good conversation about how the poet gets from point a to point b, and what impact this has on the reader.

Then, we try it again, this time with a repetitive poem like a villanelle. I've used Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" or Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." We do the discussion in small groups again with the same questions, but with the additional question of whether or not the same words take on a different meaning by the end of the journey.

We talk about how the "territory" doesn't have to be completely strange — you can get lost, turn in circles, and turn back. Poems with refrains or patterns build momentum and the repetition takes on a new meaning by the end of the poem.

This doesn't always happen with repetition. When writing is done without the detours and unexpected turns, we get writing that feels redundant, cliché or just a little yawn-worthy. We take a quick look at an example or two — lyrics from a love song or power ballad. For example, Bryan Adams' "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You," (written by Bryan Adams, Michael Kamen, and Robert John Lange) or Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" (written by Will Jennings). Does anything happen in the lyrics? Does anything change? Are we surprised and moved? Not usually. This also usually brings up good conversation about tired metaphors and images, which we talk about how to foil in our own writing with vivid, specific details.

STEP 3 (5-10 MINUTES)

Model Technique

Then, to writing! We've packed up our cars with materials and we're ready to start our trip. I demo my own free-write process as a generator for the images and content of my poem using the Elmo projector, or if one isn't available, I use a photocopy of a page from one of my free writes, so students can see some of the jumps I make when I do a freewrite.

I ask, where to begin? And where do we land by the end of the page? The demo is especially helpful if students aren't familiar with free-writing, and I've found that talking about my own writing process can be a really successful way to get students to be open about their own writing.

STEP 4 (20 MINUTES)

Free Writing

Now we pick up our pencils and paper to do our own free writes, which we will ultimately harvest for our poems. Where to start? Well, we'll turn on the radio!

I print out enough cheesy pop lyrics for everyone to have a song to read. Then, there are a couple of options:

1. Take one cliché from a cheesy pop song (we read some aloud, dramatically) and rewrite it in a reasonable, exciting, inventive way —
2. Take a line directly from the song as your starting point

Either way, we start here, and use our free write to take us somewhere new!

Everyone practices a free write for the next 15 minutes, and after a minute, I pull out the note cards of images from our introductions. I read a random card aloud, and everyone must take a detour in their free write and include that image, or a gesture toward that image. For example, if the card reads "campfire," students should either include the word campfire in their free write and see where it takes them, or describe a campfire in some way — maybe smoke or crackling shows up in the writing right then.

Depending on the student group, you can have students come up one at a time when the spirit moves them to draw a new card and read a new detour aloud to the room over the next 15 minutes. If that won't work for your group, you can keep pulling and reading out the notecards, or circulate and ask individual students to pause writing for a moment and read one aloud every minute or so.

STEP 5 (15-20 MINUTES)

Share & Revise

At the end of the free write, we partner up and share with each other. After one student in the pair reads, the other student (without looking back at the paper) recounts the images and ideas and moments that stood out to them as they listened. The author uses a highlighter to highlight or underline these sections. Then, they switch so each student has the chance to read and take notes.

Now, only the highlighted lines become our poem draft. If time permits, I demonstrate how to do this on the projector and then have the students follow. We rewrite our poem with just the highlighted lines and images, and then read it aloud, revise, add more, or rearrange, and find a title. We finish by sharing the poems aloud to hear where they start and the myriad exciting places they end.

STEP 6

Conclusion

I love to end poetry workshops with a reading — all participants (volunteers, students, and leaders) share their work. If students don't want to share their entire poems, they can share their titles, their first lines, or a golden detail, although with this workshop, it's especially fun to hear the entirety of poems so we can listen for the detours and shifts.

A class zine of poems would be a great next step, if possible. I also always like to ask students to reflect on (in pairs or as a large group) what they used or practiced in the writing of poems that they can use in other kinds of writing.