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LESSON

Rules, Rules, Rules

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Grades 5–6

TYPE

POETRY

COMMITMENT

1 Session: 1 Hour Each

Here's one way I like to read poetry (or just about any literary text): look for the rules that the poem sets up, and then look to see where and how those rules get broken. As a really simple example of what I'm talking about, let's look at the first two lines of Jim Daniels' poem "Short-Order Cook":

*"An average joe comes in
And orders thirty cheeseburgers and thirty fries."*

The surprise of the second line comes from the "rule" set up in the first — that the man who comes in is an average joe. Not every poem is so explicit about how it breaks its own rules, of course, but generally speaking, one thing that makes reading poetry so rewarding is figuring out both what the rules are and how the poem plays with them.

This lesson encourages young writers to identify the rules in their own poems and to then experience the joy of either smashing the rules outright or finding a graceful way to reimagine them.

Session:

Students will discuss the "rules" of poetry and practice recognizing them in their writing.

YOU WILL NEED

- Paper and writing utensil for each student
- A "hat" (or any other vessel) full of strips of paper identifying "people": mother, teacher, scientist,

astronaut, cook, grandfather, bus driver, dancer, painter, little brother, etc. Have enough so that each student will receive one.

- Another “hat” full of strips of paper identifying “places,” either proper nouns (New York City, Mount Everest, your town or state) or general settings (pool, garden, highway, office building, etc.) Again, have one per student
- Jim Daniel’s poem “Short-Order Cook”

HOW TO BEGIN (5 Minutes)

Setting the Rules

Starting out with your most serious face, tell the writers something along the following: “This activity is going to be all about RULES, RULES, RULES. There are going to be so many rules that probably nobody is going to have any fun at all.”

Next, tell the students you are going to read them one line of poetry. Slowly read *only the first line* of Jim Daniels’ poem “Short-Order Cook” two or three times:

“An average joe comes in”

Ask your students to tell you about the “rules” of being an average joe. Brainstorm a short life of average characteristics. Now, slowly and clearly read the second line of the poem:

“And orders thirty cheeseburgers and thirty fries.”

If you’re feeling theatrical, you can exclaim: “Hey, what happened here?! I thought this poem was about an average joe! This poem BROKE THE RULES!”

Step 1 (10 MINUTES)

Practicing the Rules in Poetry

Introduce, in your own words, the idea that poetry is about making rules and finding creative ways to break them.

For a short practice round in breaking the rules, have each writer develop one line of poetry that sets up a rule. The line could be as simple as an accepted truth (i.e. “My grandmother always wears red,” “Snakes are scary”), or the rule could come from our expectation of what will happen next (i.e. “I’m sliding down the slide” sets us up to believe you’ll arrive at the bottom).

Now have each writer compose a second line of poetry that, in ways big or small, breaks the first rule. The following two examples may be of help.

In the first example, the rule gets snapped in half:

*My grandmother always wears red
But today she's got on a long yellow dress.*

In the second example, the rule is only bent:
*My grandmother always wears red.
"Purple is half red," she says.*

Step 2 (5 Minutes)

A Frank Discussion about Poetry

Ask your students (a few volunteers or everyone, depending on class size) to read their lines so far. Congratulate them on breaking the rules so well!

Now it's time for a frank discussion about poetry. As far as poetry goes, when we talk about rules, we're not talking about them in the traditional sense (i.e. "Do this! Do that!"), but are more so talking about what the poem tells us to believe or expect.

In many cases, the rule or rules that a poem eventually breaks may take longer than one line to set up. And that's what our next writing activity is going to do — take its time setting up the rules.

Step 3 (20 Minutes)

Individual Writing

Next, set off on individual writing! Ask each student to draw a person from one hat (or whatever vessel you're using) and a place from another. Once everyone has one of each, provide this prompt:

What would your person do in the place you thought of? Would they be happy or sad? Would they sit down, dance, or order french fries? In five to seven lines of poetry, describe how your person behaves in the setting that you picked.

You may want to remind students that lines of poetry don't have to be complete sentences and don't have to rhyme.

Some students, enthused by the rule-breaking they've begun to practice, may write delightfully offbeat accounts. For example, the tale of the construction worker who does pirouettes as he crosses a parking lot. That's fine! Almost no matter what the writer composes, he or she will still be making rules — setting expectations, describing general principles — which means there will still be opportunity to break the rules.

Once students have written their five to seven lines, request that they silently read over their work. Ask them to think about what the poem says, so far, about their person's likes and dislikes, habits, moods, and outlook.

Now introduce the next part of the prompt:

Without even meaning to, you set up a rule in your poem — you've given your reader an idea about what this person is like and what to expect next from them. But should we keep the person (and the poem) in a box? No way! Poems are way more interesting to read and to write when they surprise us. Now write, in three to five more lines, about that person in a way that breaks the rule you set up.

Students could either keep writing within the same scene or situation or shift in time and setting completely. You may want to mention these options to any students who feel a little stumped about their options for breaking the rules.

Step 4 (5-15 Minutes)

Sharing Poems

Once everyone has completed their poems, ask your students to share their work. Depending on class size, this could be in small groups or in front of the entire class.

Step 5

Conclusion

I suggest ending on the following note: Poetry doesn't just break the rules only for fun (although breaking the rules in poetry sure can be fun!). Often, a poem breaks the rules to show us that things are more complicated than they seem. In other words, poetry gives us a new way to think about the world around us, the people we meet, and the situations in which we find ourselves.