

SPARKS

Exploring Connections

by 826 National, in
partnership with
Academy of American
Poets

GRADES 5–12

TYPE

NARRATIVE
POETRY

PRESENTED BY

**ACADEMY OF
AMERICAN POETS**

In this Spark, designed for the "Dear Poet" project, students explore the many ways you can connect to a poem and the poet who penned it.

WHAT YOUR STUDENTS WILL LEARN

Students will learn more about making meaning and connecting to texts.

WHAT YOU WILL DO

Before You Begin

- This Spark is presented in part by the Academy of American Poets to engage students everywhere in Dear Poet, a multimedia education project that invites young people in grades five through twelve to write letters in response to poems written and read by award-winning poets.
- Before you begin, students should have already chosen a poet and poem they would like to respond to. Students can choose a video from this year's lineup of award-winning poets on Academy of American Poets' [website](#), or you can choose to project and watch [all of the videos](#) as a class. We also suggest choosing a mentor text and its Dear Poet author video, to view before starting this lesson. We recommend "[Pierce's letter to Denice Frohman](#)" and "[Denice Frohman reads 'once a marine biologist told me octopuses have three hearts'](#)," both from the 2025 Dear Poet project.
- Content Note: In this letter, Pierce reflects on how

Frohman’s poem helped him grieve the loss of a close friend to suicide. We recommend reading the letter beforehand, to determine whether the content would be upsetting to your students.

Additional mentor texts from the 2025 Dear Poet project can be found [here](#), and the corresponding 2025 Dear Poet author videos can be found on the Academy of American Poets’ [website](#).

- We recommend setting aside at least one class period, or about one hour, for students to browse, enjoy, and connect to the poets featured this year *before* you begin.
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STEP 1 (5 Minutes)

To begin, ask the whole class what it means to feel “connected” to something that you’ve read, watched, or listened to and write their ideas on the board. After students have shared their thoughts, ask them to think of the last story they felt connected to. This can be a poem, a movie, a book, a social media reel, etc. — anything where a narrator is sharing a story. After they think of their example, ask them to free-write for 1 minute about why that piece resonates with them. After that 1 minute is finished, ask students to share the example they thought of and why they feel connected to it — broad answers are welcome, but naming specific elements are most helpful. Write their answers on the board.

Educator Note: Students may or may not say that the meaning of their example resonated with them. If they don’t bring it up, ask them whether or not meaning should be on their list. Let them know that this is the element they will dig into more today.

STEP 2 (5 Minutes)

Next, ask students to make small groups of 2-4 (this conversation can also be kept in the full-group, if that would be more useful for your class). Let them know that you’ll be asking for a few groups to volunteer their answers when time is up. Give the groups 2-3 minutes to chat about *meaning* together:

- What is *meaning*?
- What are some of the elements of a poem that help create meaning?
- Who do you think gets to make meaning: the poet or the reader?

After the time is up, ask for the volunteers to share their answers. Students do not need to say these exact words, but here are some general definitions of the first two questions:

- What is *meaning*?
 - Meaning is the overall message a poem is trying to convey
- What are some of the elements of a poem that help create meaning?
 - Meaning can be made through the use of poetic devices, such as symbolism, imagery, form, and dialogue—any choice that can communicate the intended meaning clearly and vividly.

The third question is a bit more complicated. Some students may feel that the poet creates the meaning, whereas other students may feel that the reader creates the meaning. If students haven't already been introduced to this idea, propose to students that poems exist in a gray space: The poet writes with their own lived experiences, just as the reader reads with their own; both sets of experiences matter. At its best, a poem casts a line from poet to reader, angling for an emotional response that hopefully comes, once the poem has left the poet's hands.

STEP 3 (10-15 Minutes)

Next, students will need physical copies of the poem they chose. Ask them to read their poem and underline any pieces of the poem that they connect with. Then, on page 1 of the [Exploring Connections—Handout](#), they will choose 3-5 of those connections to explore more deeply. In row 3 of the handout, students will write about why their connection matters. In this row, ask students to share family stories, personal memories, values, etc.

Educator Note: If students are struggling to find many examples to underline, it's OK for them to switch poems. Suggest that they briefly skim a different poem, noticing the connections they make, before choosing another poem and digging into it more deeply.

STEP 4 (5 Minutes)

Finally, in their writing journals, ask students to write a reflection about their connection to the poem. They can elaborate on any of the stories, memories, or values they brainstormed on page 1.

STEP 5 (5-10 Minutes)

Ask for volunteers to share any part of their reflection that they would like to share with the whole group.

MATERIALS

- Each student's chosen poem
- A mentor text and its Dear Poet author video, to view before starting this lesson. We recommend "[Pierce's letter to Denice Frohman](#)" and "[Denice Frohman reads 'once a marine biologist told me octopuses have three hearts'](#)," both from the 2025 Dear Poet project.
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- [Exploring Connections—Handout](#)
 - 1 copy per student
- Writing journal and writing utensil