

SPARKS

Exploring Voice

by 826 National, in
partnership with
Academy of American
Poets

GRADES 5–12

TYPE

POETRY

PRESENTED BY

**ACADEMY OF
AMERICAN POETS**

In this Spark, designed for the "Dear Poet" project, students will learn more about voice: what it is exactly, and how to name the elements of it.

WHAT YOUR STUDENTS WILL LEARN

Students will learn more about what voice is in a poem and how to describe it.

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 at Academy of American Poets' [website](#), or you can choose to project and watch [all of the videos](#) as a class.
- We also recommend choosing a mentor text and its Dear Poet author video to view before starting this lesson. We've included a letter to poet Jericho Brown on page 1 of the [Exploring Voice—Handout](#). You can watch the video of Brown reading his poem, "Labor," [here](#).
- 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 (5-7 Minutes)

Begin by playing a quick word association game with students. Give students 30 seconds to write down the first 5 words that come to mind when they hear the word “voice.” Write their responses on the board. This game will yield a variety of different answers (like singing, yelling, messages, etc.) and can help frame the conversation that “voice” in poetry means something different than our general understanding of the word.

Then, share with students: Though voice can be challenging to define, at its core, it refers to the unique ways a writer, or the speaker of the poem, appears in the text.

- **Voice:** The unique personality, tone, or style presented by a writer, or speaker of the poem.

Voice can be developed through a variety of techniques, including point of view, syntax, tone and word choice, and sensory details and imagery. The speaker’s voice can change from piece to piece, depending on the genre and purpose. In the next part of the lesson, students will begin exploring voice in the poem of their choice.

STEP 2 (5 Minutes)

In the next step, students will read the poem they chose multiple times and answer questions about the different components of voice that give way for the speaker of the poem. Before they begin, review these terms (you may also want to write them on the board as a reminder throughout the exercise). Links

to the Academy of American Poets' glossary of poetic terms are provided.

- Point of view (POV): How close the reader is to the narrator and the story
 - First-person (I, me, my, we, us): Generally the closest to the story, since the reader can see everything through the narrator's eyes
 - Second-person (you, your, yours): Still relatively close, since the narrator is speaking directly to the reader; however, the writer is still in control of what the reader sees when
 - Third-person (they, them, it, its): The furthest away from the story and the writer, since the third-person POV creates the feeling that the reader is watching the action without understanding why something is happening
- Syntax: In poetry, syntax refers to the arrangement of words on the page and is the backbone of voice. Syntax can be seen in the word order of a line or by the arrangement of a stanza as a whole. Syntax can also refer to grammar conventions, such as the placement of periods or commas.
- [Tone](#): The overall feeling that a poem is trying to convey and how the writer wants the reader to feel after they've finished reading.
 - Think of the phrase "tone of voice," which students may have heard before. Why might that phrase be relevant here?
 - Tone can be built through word choice, rhythm, and even punctuation
- [Imagery](#) and sensory details: Imagery is the picture the poet is painting, and sensory details are one of the colors of paint they're using to do it.
 - Sensory details contribute vivid language that bring the poem to life

Educator Note: Students who have chosen the same poem can pair up in small groups of 2-4 and work through this step together.

STEP 3 (10-15 Minutes)

For this step, make sure each student has a hard copy of their chosen poem and pages 1 and 2 of the [Exploring Voice—Handout](#). Students will perform a close reading of their poem and answer questions about the way their poem’s voice is expressed. On page 3, they will be asked to describe the poem’s voice, based on what they read.

After students have finished the handouts, ask for volunteers to share their description of the poem’s voice and which of the elements they felt was the most present in their poem.

STEP 4 (10 Minutes)

Last, students will develop at least one piece of appreciation for the voice of the poem, as well as at least one question for the poet to include in their Dear Poet project letter. They should use the handouts they’ve already completed as their jumping off point and then write their new sentences on page 4 of the handout. Here are some things they can consider:

- What was one unique element about the voice used in their poem? What did they love about it and why? Or, are they curious about where the poet came up with that idea?
- Was there one phrase or word that contributed to the poem’s voice that they connected to? Are they curious about why that word or phrase is important to the poet?
- Are there any similarities you can draw to the voice of this poet and your own, or other poets you’ve read?

If students finish this step quickly, they have the option of taking this lesson on voice further by writing a poem of their own that emulates the voice of the poet they chose. Have students choose one of the elements from page 1 of the handout and write their own poem that mirrors the way that technique is used, with their own content.

STEP 5 (5 Minutes)

Finally, ask students to find a partner and share what they learned about voice from their close readings and if they plan on incorporating any of what they learned in their writing, moving forward.

Optional Extension: Give all students the opportunity to write the emulation poem mentioned in Step 5! If some students have finished their emulation poems already, they can form a peer review group and provide feedback while the other students write their drafts.

MATERIALS

- Each student's chosen poem
- A mentor text and its Dear Poet author video, to view before starting this lesson.
- We've included a letter to poet Jericho Brown on page 1 of the Exploring Voice—Handout. You can watch the video of Brown reading his poem, "Labor," [here](#).
 - 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](#).
- [Exploring Voice—Handout](#)
 - 1 copy per student
- Writing journal and writing utensil