826 DIGITAL

VIDEO

Write With . . . Life Stories: Moments as Poetry with Reginald Dwayne Betts

by 826 National and Life Stories

GRADES 9–12

TYPE

POETRY

PRESENTED BY

LIFE STORIES

In this lesson, you will hear about the life and art of Reginald Dwayne Betts and write a poem that captures a meaningful moment from your everyday life.

WHAT YOUR STUDENTS WILL LEARN

About Life Stories

Life Stories is a non-profit media organization that creates and distributes documentaries, interviews, and educational resources about people whose lives inspire meaningful change. These stories address issues of civics, history, politics, the arts and culture by shining the spotlight on relatable human stories of purpose and meaning in times of change. Life Stories provides open access to all their content for communities and classrooms through their curated website and YouTube channel.

About *The Thread*

The Thread is a new documentary interview series by Life Stories, exploring what it means to live a purpose-driven life through conversations with multi-faceted people who have helped shape our society. Each 30-minute episode takes viewers on a personal journey into the life of extraordinary people who candidly share their triumphs and failures. *The Thread* is available on the Life Stories website and YouTube channel, and as a podcast across all major platforms. Teaching

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The Thread brings the series into the classroom with episode lessons designed to strengthen social emotional learning and media literacy skills and expand the scope of subject matter in Social Studies and English Language Arts. Future seasons of *The Thread* will include similar curricular support.

WHAT YOU WILL DO

Introduction:

In this video, Reginald Dwayne Betts recalls spending nine years in prison, starting when he was 16. He examines the impact of incarceration on creativity and what led him to become a poet. Betts discusses the harsh realities of the criminal justice system from his perspectives as a felon, and then as a law student at Yale and a public defender. Please visit "Reginald Dwayne Betts: A Voice for the Incarcerated" to see the full lesson created by Life Stories.

Content Notes:

- In this video, Reginald Betts recalls his experiences spending nine years in prison as a young Black man. While delivering this lesson, it is important to be mindful that this topic may be challenging for some of your students.
- We suggest you screen the video beforehand for topics that might need more historical or cultural context to help students access the full meaning of the speaker's story. The lesson provided by Life Stories offers discussion questions to help your students dig deeper.

STEP 1

To begin, watch the video from 09:34–14:56, and then answer this question in your writing journal:

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What do you think Reginald Dwayne Betts means when he said, “You can write a whole poem, it’s just capturing a moment”?

STEP 2

Next, think about what you already know about poetry. Write your answers in your writing journal:

- **What is a poem’s goal: information, personal connection, persuasion, etc.?**
- **Generally, are poems big, sprawling narratives or smaller, bite-sized stories?**
- **What is one thing that you think makes a strong poem?**

Now, read the following three poems by Reginald Dwayne Betts. Each poem offers a different perspective on a moment or event. As you read the poems, take note of your favorite phrases or word choices.

- “I’m Learning Nothing This Night”
- “Prison”
- “Memorial Hoops”

After you’ve read all three poems, choose one poem and answer the Reflection Questions on page 1 of the Moments As Poetry—Handout. There are no wrong answers; these questions are just meant to get you thinking more deeply about Reginald Dwayne Betts’s writing.

STEP 3

To prepare for writing your own poem, spend 2–4 days observing the moments in your day-to-day life that get you thinking and wondering—the moments that make you mad, curious, ecstatic, etc. Document your thoughts on page 2 of the handout. Consider either completing your entry either at the end of the

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day, before you go to sleep, or keeping the page with you throughout the day, adding to it as you experience a thought.

STEP 4

Finally, write a poem about one of the moments you documented in your writing journal. Here are some things to think about to help you get started:

- What is the *so-what* of the moment you've chosen to write about? What do you need to show the reader (actions, parts of the scene, etc.) to help them understand that *so-what*?
- One thing that makes poetry beautiful is its size: a poem is often short but impactful because it zooms in on the emotional impact of an event. Because of a poem's length, it's helpful to maximize your word choices. What is the tone or vibe of the moment you're writing your poem about? Create a list of words (nouns, verbs, adjectives—anything!) that will help convey your poem's tone. You don't need to use all of the words from your list in your poem, but it gives you a strong place to start.
- Try starting with sentences, as if you were writing an essay. Then, cut out and add words and line breaks to make it feel more like a poem.
- Consider a different perspective. Depending on the moment you're writing about, you could write the poem from the perspective of a different person—or object—who was present during that moment. What would they learn from this moment, and does it differ from what you learned?

STEP 5

Finally, take a moment to reflect on poetry and its role in perspective-shifting. Answer these questions in your writing journal: **How has this process of writing poetry helped you view situations or events differently? Could you see yourself applying what you learned in your daily life? Why or why not?**

MATERIALS

- Reginald Dwayne Betts: A Voice for the Incarcerated – *The Thread* video

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- Moments As Poetry—Handout
- Selected poems by Reginald Dwayne Betts. Suggested:
  - “I’m Learning Nothing This Night”
  - “Prison”
  - “Memorial Hoops”
- Writing journal and writing utensil

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