

The Arc of Teaching a Poem

by Baron Wormser and Dawn Potter

Begin by reading the poem aloud, slowly and distinctly so your students can hear the words. Poetry is an oral art and always wants to be heard.

As part of the oral reading, have your students write down the words of the poem as you read them. In other words, turn the reading into a dictation. Allow as much time as your students need to write down the words. Answer questions about punctuation and spelling as necessary. Begin with small amounts of poetry and gradually build. Two or three lines are fine to begin with.

Once the students have the words down on paper, the discussion of the poem can begin. Start by asking students what word in the poem they find most interesting and why. You can ask them all manner of questions about words, such as “what word surprises you? confuses you? stimulates you?” As the students respond, write down the words they mention on the blackboard—both specific words from the poem and key words in their responses. As this group response unfolds, start to create webs on the blackboard that connect one word with another.

A poem is a series of careful word choices. Any discussion of the words is bound to generate connections among the poem’s words that show how the poem coheres and generates meaning. Our analogy for discussing a poem is that the poem is a pebble dropped into the pond of consciousness. Like a pebble, the poem makes concentric circles that radiate outward. Those circles reach toward infinity. So the model for discussing is expansive. We want to show students how art reaches toward the infinite and how the words of the poem can demonstrate the poem’s richness. What we seek to avoid is the reductive approach—that is, narrowing the poem down to a kernel of meaning. People go to art to expand their feelings. Thus, in our discussion of a poem we seek to show the poem’s natural expansiveness and how the connections among the words are simultaneously infinite and genuine.

You can lead the word-choice discussion for as long as you deem it to be relevant; but the longer the discussion, the more likely the students will come to appreciate the care that went into making the poem. In addition, a lengthy discussion gives a greater number of students time to feel confident enough to share their thoughts and to realize that there is no single right answer. After mentioning word choice, you can ask questions about other aspects of the poem: line, metaphor, rhythm, sound, form, diction, etc. In other words, you can enrich students’ understanding of the poem by using word choice as a platform and then going further into the art of the poem.

After these sorts of discussions—word choice plus other artistic matters—students should be able to talk about the theme of the poem. We like to challenge our students to state the theme in a word or two, such as “fear,” “death,” “anxiety,” “love”—whatever large subjective or abstract

words apply. Then we ask them to justify the theme by speaking or writing about the actualities of the poem: the word choices and the rest of the art used in making it.

The final stage is writing a poem based on the poem that has been discussed. The teacher can set up loose parameters for the writing assignment while still using the poem as a guide. Thus, Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods" might trigger students to write about being in a specific place and pausing to look at what is there. Every poem is a potential prompt. The cycle of writing down the original poem, discussing its actualities, and then writing a new poem helps students internalize the artistic process that went into making the original poem. They get to use their insights creatively.

In terms of dealing with the revision of student poems, we emphasize two stars and a wish. That means that we star two things in the poem that we like (word choices, for instance) and then make a wish for something that could be changed. Revision hinges on the phrase "what if?" "What if you added a metaphor in line 2?" is a typical question. The "what if" approach downplays a student's emotional investment in the new poem, an attachment that often stifles his or her willingness to change anything. The question simply asks the student to try a specific change and see if it works. If it doesn't work, the student can always change the poem back to the original or try out a different idea.