

"Beautiful" Poetry: Tuning In to Poetry through Rhythm

by Frances Chamberlain

I use this lesson, entitled "Beautiful Poetry," as part of a structured writing workshop at the beginning of the school year. I work with students during the first trimester, and we are ready for a full-blown writing workshop by October.

Why would I make the case for poetry as part of the writing workshop? Using poetry in my classroom has been invaluable. My young writers look through the eyes of a poet and see the reasoning behind word choice, form, and rhythm. They take on the poet's role while writing about what really matters to them. When I ask my writers if they can hear their voices in the poems, they respond with a smile and a nod, making the concept of writer's voice much easier to teach. Poetry opens doors for my students.

This lesson is adapted from a writing exercise titled "Lyric Poetry" by Dana Gioia (*The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell). The objective is to tap into the music of language, to introduce rhythm and beat in poetry, and help students hear metrical patterns. In addition, this activity helps to familiarize students with the techniques that songwriters and poets use to convey their messages.

The culture in my classroom is built on trust. Writers feel free to read each other's work, to ask the teacher to read their pieces, and to share their writing with the class on a voluntary basis. "Beautiful Poetry" works well in this type of writing atmosphere.

Anticipatory Set — Acrostic Poetry

We begin this poetry lesson with a quick acrostic poem activity using the word *rhythm*. I put the directions and a sample acrostic poem (see the example on page 8) on the overhead projector for students to view. Writing this word down vertically, we first brainstorm in general for ideas, words, and phrases related to rhythm. I read the sample poem and then ask students to come up with ideas that relate to the topic and start with any of the letters in the word *rhythm*. For example, my students typically come up with interesting rhythm-related responses such as:

- melody
- time
- rapping
- high and low notes
- Thriller*
- tune
- hip-hop
- hand clapping
- message

Students then draft a speedy acrostic poem on their own. I usually give students about fifteen minutes for this step. After we've each crafted an acrostic poem, we share some of the words and phrases from our poems, and talk about the use of rhythm in poetry. I prompt students with questions such as: How is poetry related to rhythm? Do poets use rhythm in their poems?

Students often tell me that poetry has a beat to it, and I offer that poets have many ways to express this beat within language, which we will learn about throughout our writing workshops during the year. After everyone has a chance to share, we turn to the acrostic activity.

I give these instructions to students in handout form:

"Rhythm" Acrostic Poem

Purpose: The purpose of this writing activity is to think about the associations of rhythm. What words can best describe this important, poetic term?

Instructions: Write the word "rhythm" vertically in big letters.

Next, think about words that describe or evoke rhythm. Ask yourself, what does rhythm mean to you? What are your experiences with rhythm? How does rhythm affect your life on a daily basis? Select interesting words that capture the true meaning of rhythm, and remember that for your poem, you'll need some words that begin with the letters r, h, y, t, h, and m.

Now choose the words for your acrostic poem. Next to each one of the letters for the word Rhythm, write one word that begins with the given letter.

Example:

R egularity
H armony
Y odelaheehoo!
T oe-tapping time
H umming
M eter

"Beautiful" Poetry Activity

The following materials are needed for the main activity:

- handouts of the lyrics for "Beautiful" (performed by Christina Aguilera on the CD *Stripped*), which are available at:
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/christinaaguilera/beautiful.html>
- a copy of the song on CD or as a digital file (e.g., purchased through iTunes,)
- a CD player or computer (with headphones optional)
- a handout of the student instructions (see Figure 1, page 9)
- paper and pen/pencils.

Note: You can also do this same activity with a different song, or let students choose their own songs, but the song(s) need to be chosen carefully in order to retain the emphasis on rhythm and beat.

This lesson (including the acrostic activity) takes approximately two 50-minute class periods to complete, depending on how much time you allow your students for the composition process.

The first step is to play the song while the students follow along with the lyrics that you pass out prior to the lesson. Preface this with a few things for the students to keep in mind:

1. Students should pay attention to the beat and rhythm of the music.
2. Students will be singing the song aloud together after this, so they should also listen to the melody.
3. Students should listen to the lyrics and think about how language is used with the music.

Next, the song is played a second time; this time everybody (including the teacher) sings the lyrics together, and students are encouraged to discuss the song a little more and point out what they notice. I get them to discuss patterns in the lyrics by asking if they noticed any repeated words, repeated ideas, words or phrases that had the same idea, and so on. When I ask students if they can identify the refrain/chorus section of the lyrics, they usually recognize that as the "I am beautiful" section.

I also ask students to suggest reasons for the changes in the chorus from "I am beautiful" to "You are beautiful" and to "We are beautiful," and lead them into talking about the message, or theme, of the song. The most common student comment is that the writer wants us to believe that we are all beautiful in our own way.

This is a great opportunity to express how poets use many techniques in order to convey their message or purpose. In this particular song, the writer uses her choice of words, plus repetition and pronoun changes, to emphasize her main idea.

Next, I hand out the instructions (see Figure 1, page 9) and explain the assignment, which is for students to model a poem after this one based on the melody, the rhythm, the rhyme scheme, and even the line lengths of the song we just heard. Students should be able to sing their lyrics to the melody of the song when they have finished.

Before students get started, I like to share a sample poem based on "Beautiful" to give my writers an idea of what the final product can look like. The very first time I did this lesson, I read a poem that I wrote to the music (see Figure 2, page 9), but I have also used poems that other students have written in previous years.

Students enjoy hearing the models read aloud, and this

Instructions

Purpose: The purpose of this writing activity is to hear the natural, rhythmic beat of music. When you create a poem from a song, you begin tapping into the music of language. Getting your ear and your own rhythmic sense involved will help you learn how to hear metrical patterns in poetry.

Instructions: Listen to the “Beautiful” lyrics. If you need to listen to it more than once, you may use headphones at the audio center. Come up with new lyrics for this song. You may need to hum the tune in your head. You want to keep the same line lengths and rhyme scheme although you are completely changing the words. If you have difficulty at first, try writing new words to the chorus part of the song. You may also look at the actual lyrics to get a feel for how long the lines are and for how the rhyme scheme sounds.

When you have completed your poem, you should treat the new lyrics as a poem independent from the actual song. Make revisions, and change these words into a poetic form. Read aloud, hum, sing, and do whatever it takes to shape your poem into something that sounds good to you. Don’t stop until you are satisfied with the sound, the beat, and the flow of your new poem. You have now created a poem with meter that was derived from your own ear and rhythmic sense.

Figure 1: Student Instructions for “Beautiful” Poetry (adapted from “Lyric Poetry” by Dana Gioia in *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*)

helps them get a feel for what they’re about to do. Some students may find the activity challenging at first, but they can be allowed to work in pairs or small groups for support, and scaffolding suggestions (see sidebar, page 10) may be used as needed.

When students have completed their drafts, we share, read aloud, and talk about the intended themes. Students who are brave enough can even be encouraged to sing their song/poems to a rhythmic accompaniment.

Here’s an example of how one student revised her refrain slightly to provide a progression of meaning throughout the poem.

Stanzas 2, 4, and 6 from “Rainbow”

Clouds may build up, may cover all blue sky
Rain may patter down
The clouds will move on, I know I’ll find a way
Rain won’t come back down
Maybe they’ll go away today

Clouds have built up, they cover all blue sky
Rain just patters down
The clouds will move on, I know I’ll find a way
Rain won’t come back down
Maybe they’ll go away today

The clouds have left, all I see is blue sky
Sun keeps shining down, yeah oh
Rainbows shine; I knew I’d find a way
Yes, sun keeps shining down
Yes they went away today

To publish the students’ final poems, I opted to construct a poetry anthology that I showcased at Open House. I had

Sample Poem

“Pendulum”
by Frances Chamberlain, adapted from “Beautiful,”
composed by Linda Perry

Everyday is a wonderment, the eyes with greed, take in
the scenes

Everyday it could be the last, snuffed out
I berate forgotten days

Life’s a pendulum that moves around and sways
I might fall and drown
Life’s a pendulum that never goes away
Immortal – Be renowned
I may find happiness one day

Resting free clouds are humorous
It seems the end is always soon
Dying down you find impending breath, it almost runs
Out of the blinding sun, is that the way it is

Life’s a pendulum that moves around and sways
You might fall and drown
Life’s a pendulum that never goes away
Immortal – Be renowned
You might find happiness one day

If everything we do
Has purpose with each day
We enjoy the boon, with eyes that are awake
Think sail away from fate, this thing we call our life
Well it better be a something that is beautiful inside

Life’s a pendulum that moves around and sways
We might fall and drown
Life’s a pendulum that never goes away
Immortal – Be renowned
We might find happiness one day

Figure 2: Sample Poem

Scaffolding Opportunities

I have used these lessons with high school students and observed great results. I have also presented these lessons for writing clubs, summer author camps, and writing symposiums for young writers.

Enrichment opportunities and scaffolding techniques such as those listed below can be incorporated into the lesson to specifically target English language learners (ELLs) and gifted students, or to help adapt these lessons for grade levels other than high school.

I found that most students could complete their poems once they heard the examples; however, some of my students needed guidance throughout their creative processes. Since students had a copy of the lyrics, I often used this as a tool for hesitant and "stuck" writers.

Here are some additional ideas:

- Brainstorm with students who find the starting stage challenging. I coached one young man: together we created a cluster map, and he decided to write about the exhilaration of a soccer game. Students may also work on the chorus part first, which is sometimes easier.
- Suggest that students simply cross out words and replace them with other words.

This worked well for my ELLs. With this tactic, though, poems tended to lack originality. Students may want to start this way, but should be encouraged

to write the rest of the poem on their own.

- Supply headphones hooked up to a CD player for students who wish to listen to the song. Listening to the beat and melody while following along with the lyrics can help auditory and visual learners.
- Pair up students for cooperative learning opportunities which act as support for reluctant writers. When one student was on a roll, he/she was able to help a fellow writer who was struggling.
- In the middle of a writing session, read aloud student samples from volunteer poets to express the possibilities. Some students found it helpful to hear a draft version of another writer's lyrics.
- Work with ELLs in a small group and show them how to search for personal meaning by using various brainstorming techniques. Cluster maps, lists, freewriting, and writing webs are effective prewriting activities. You could also create a word bank as a group that features words that have the same rhyme scheme as the lyrics. A teacher-created frame of the song would also be appropriate for ELLs who need even more support. One of my ELLs wrote a compelling poem about bullying. Finding personal meaning opened up his word bank.

my class artists create covers for the anthology, and then I spiral bound the poems together.

Reflection

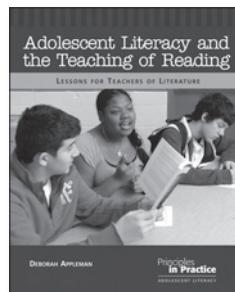
This lesson left a lasting impression on my young writers. Although challenging for some, this lesson has worked for young writers from the 6–12 grades over the past few years. I have led these authors to a finished product that is usually a source of pride. Many poets surface after this lesson, and it is always rewarding to see a youngster decide that they indeed have poetry within. Further exploration of rhythm will guide me to new poetry lessons and to other inquiries within the realm of poetry.

Resources

Behn, Robin, and Twichell, Chase (Editors). *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*. New York: CollinsReference: An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 1992, pgs. 184–186.

Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form* (revised edition). New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1979.

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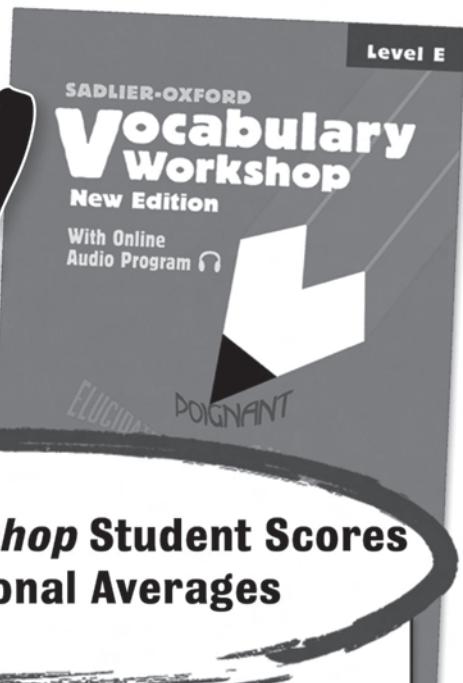
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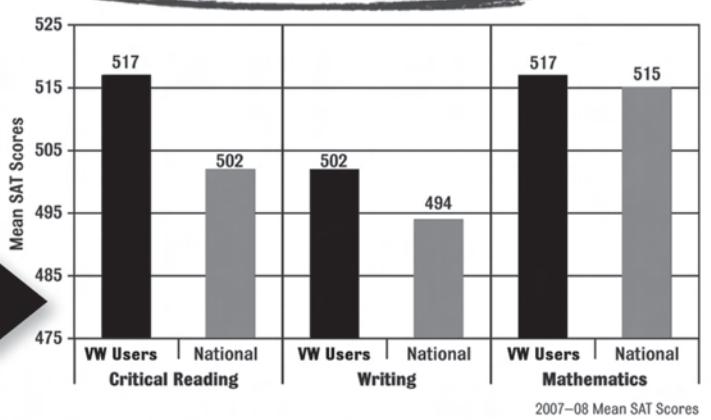
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