

Title: The Language of Surprise

Grade Ranges:

 K-4
 5-8
 X 9-12

Subject Tag:

Creative Writing: Poetry
Reading Skills

Synopsis:

Students will engage in word play exercises to examine the ways writers create poetic tension. By looking carefully at a poet's ability to evoke a response by using the element of surprise — offering something unexpected — students will be able to create some of that tension in their own writing. They will work as a large group to define *cliché* as a form of predictable writing. Then they will brainstorm in smaller groups to come up with examples of phrases that illustrate poetic tension, and finally, they will complete an independent poetry writing assignment.

Keywords:

poetry, poetic tension, figurative language, metaphor, simile, cliché, imagery, creative writing, diction, tone

Body:

At the beginning of the lesson, present students with a number of fill-in-the-blank clichéd expressions, such as:

- Blind as _____ (a bat)
- Hungry as _____ (a wolf)
- Cold as _____ (ice)
- Sharp as _____ (a tack)

They are to respond quickly and finish the similes. Discuss students' choices and the effectiveness of language that is predictable. Define cliché and explore the choices writers make by asking questions like the following:

1. When do we typically use clichés?
2. How does a cliché affect an audience?
3. What can we as writers do to “turn a cliché on its head”?
4. What might a reader's response be if we offer word choices that are surprising rather than predictable?

As a large group, take clichéd comparisons like the ones above and try something new. Ask students to come up with other endings to the same similes. Encourage them to be specific, to avoid the predictable, to consider that words have multiple meanings and can be used in infinite contexts. Try to get students thinking “outside the box.”

Next, pass out a copy of a poem like “Happy as a Dog’s Tail” by Anna Swir ([links/resources](#)), or Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” or another that illustrates a writer’s use of simile or comparison. Use the poems to talk about the ways specific choices affect a reader’s reaction or experience. In these poems, for example, there is an almost universal reaction to the images of a dog’s tail and cloud. The comparisons are specific; the images are strong. If time permits and students are ready for a more technical analysis, this could then lead to a more in-depth discussion of tone.

Sensory Mix & Match

One way of creating the element of surprise for readers is to avoid the predictable. Another way is to play with readers’ senses — to give them something unexpected, perhaps even to ask them to see with their ears, hear with their senses of touch, taste, and smell.

Discuss with students that one of the tools we have as writers is diction — the actual words we choose to use. Poetry, of course, relies on the economy of words. Our language, then, must be deliberate and effective. By mixing and matching words that appeal to specific senses and by coming up with unexpected sensory images, writers can create poetic tension.

In small groups, have students come up with a list of noun phrases like these that reflect the mixing and matching of senses:

- Silky shadow
- Honey-sweet feet of a baby
- Bitter eyes
- A song’s violet lyrics

The noun in each phrase “calls” to be described with a particular sense. A shadow, for example, is typically an image that appeals to the sense of sight. What happens when we choose another sensory word to describe it?

Again, encourage students to be specific and creative in their choices. Use the board to collect the examples from the groups. Put them all up (both good and bad). At this point, it may be best, too, to limit “editorial” comments about effectiveness or ineffectiveness of examples. A board full of strong, specific language creates quite an impression and can be a comfort for students who are anxious about writing poetry. (30 minutes)

Find examples of poetry to show students how writers, particularly poets, rely on sensory imagery and create tension, often with this mixing and matching.

A few samples that work well:

Selections from *This Same Sky*.

“Mending the Adobe” by Hayden Carruth

“Quail in Autumn” by William Jay Smith

“April” Linda Pastan

(Nye, Naomi Shihab. *This Same Sky*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. A wonderful collection of poems from around the world.)

Selections from *Poetspeak*

“Between Ebb and Flow” by Fadwa Tuqan

“Remembering” by Xue Di

“The Labourer” by Toolsy Daby

(Janeczko, Paul B. *Poetspeak: In their work, about their work*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1991. A compilation with interesting comments from the poets about their poems’ sources and their writing process.)

Other poems, also found online through the links below:

“Meeting at Night” by Robert Browning from *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. London: Oxford University Press, 1911; also available in other compilations including those listed in the “related links” section.

“Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden from *Angle of Ascent: New and Collected Poems*. New York: Liveright, 1975

Finally, it’s time for students to write. The assignment: choose a phrase from the class’s brainstorm or make up a new phrase of your own. Let that be the starting point for a poem — and it can, of course, end up being just a single line or detail. The poem can be about a place or an event, a person or a feeling, but allow the single piece of imagery to be the seed from which it grows.

Related Links:

TeenLit.com

<http://www.teenlit.com/workshop/poetips.htm>

A site designed just for young writers. This page features a short list of accessible poetry-writing tips.

The Poetry Archives

<http://www.emule.com/poetry/?page=poe&poe=309>

Robert Browning’s “Meeting at Night” is available on this page of this site.

Favorite Poems Project

<http://www.favoritepoem.org/poems/hayden/>

Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” is available here.

Amazon.com

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/search-handle-form/002-0183689-1631279>

This link connects to purchasing information for compilations of Robert Browning’s work. *My Last Duchess and Other Poems (Dover Thrift Edition)* and *Robert Browning’s Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Criticism (Norton Critical Edition)* are two that contain “Meeting at Night.” Other poetry compilations are also available at this site.

Features:

- Contains special education tips
- Quick Activity (less than 30 minutes; story starter)
- Requires Internet access for students to complete

Objectives:

1. To explore the ways writers use language effectively to create an impact on the reader.
2. To identify poetic techniques and attempt to transfer those elements to poetry writing.
3. To engage in “word play,” exercises that illustrate the powerfully malleable nature of language.

Standards:

NY: 2: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.

NYC: E3b. The student participates in group meetings. **E4b.** The student analyzes and subsequently revises work to clarify it or make it more effective in communicating the intended message or thought. The student’s revisions should be made in light of the purposes, audiences, and contexts that apply to the work. **E5a.** The student responds to non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and drama using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes. **E5b.** The student produces work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre.

CT: 1. Reading and Responding. Students will read and respond in individual, literal, critical and evaluative ways to literary, informational and persuasive texts. **2. Producing Texts** Students will produce written, oral and visual texts to express, develop and substantiate ideas and experiences. **3. Applying English Language Conventions** Students will apply the conventions of standard English in oral and written communication. **4. Exploring and Responding To Texts** Students will use the language arts to explore and respond to classical and contemporary texts from many cultures and literary periods.

NJ: 3.3: All Students Will Write In Clear, Concise, Organized Language That Varies In Content And Form For Different Audiences And Purposes. **3.4:** All Students Will Read Various Materials And Texts With Comprehension And Critical Analysis.

Prerequisite Skills:

1. Students have a basic understanding of poetic techniques and terms and are able to recognize them.
2. Students have had some experience reading texts analytically and can identify effective writing strategies at work in those texts.
3. Students have had some practice attempting to use effective writing strategies in their own work.

Time Required:

Approximately 100 minutes.

Technology and Materials Needed:

1. Blackboard or paper and easel
2. Copies of selected poems
3. Students' own notebooks

Assessment Criteria:

1. Are students able to recognize cliché?
2. Are students able to identify language that is strong because of its specific use of detail and sensory imagery?
3. Are students able to create phrases that use specific images and/or appeal to the senses?
4. Are students able to compose a poem that illustrates the use of specific, sensory detail?

Recommended Lesson Plan Review Date:

Review Comments:

Check Web sites.