

INTRODUCTION

Purposeful Poetry Pauses

This is not a book about writing poems but a book to help students grow as practiced and accomplished writers, first in little poetic steps, and afterward in longer pieces in any genre.

When I announce to my classes of ninth graders each September that we are going to begin every class period with a poem, I am usually greeted with wide eyes and a few reluctant groans. The word *poetry*, for students and adults alike, often conjures past experiences that were uncomfortable, unpleasant, or uninviting.

On one hand, we have students, and many teachers, who have been cornered by a Longfellow poem and forced to dissect it frog-style, pulling out each organ of metaphor, each ligament of allusion, pinning them all with labels. The smell of formaldehyde practically filled the room, and students were left with the impression that poems are complicated, dead things designed by the poet to puzzle readers. These are the students with too much practice in “groan-filled packets of figurative language overkill” (Bernabei & Van Prooyen, 2020, p. xii).

On the other hand, some students are asked to bare their soul in a poem, to tap into their inner Sylvia Plath within a forty-five-minute class period, sharing their depth and vulnerability with a randomly assigned partner for feedback. They perceive poetry as threatening in an entirely different way. These students believe that poetry requires some self-revelation that feels deeply uncomfortable in the classroom and may cling to the damaging myth that writing poetry is a spiritual gift that the universe bestows upon some and not others. If a student is not yet comfortable being as candid or exposed as Rachel Wiley or

Rudy Francisco in their beautiful spoken word pieces, can they still be a poet?

To be clear, I do not oppose teaching poetry explication or writing poetry from our deepest personal experiences. I want my students to be able to wrangle with nineteenth-century poems that are not completely understandable on a first read, AND I want students to grow in their ability to express their deepest personal thoughts and feelings in a genre that invites the exploration of inner space. Too often though, when teachers read and write poems in a single, annual unit, we snowball so much into so little time that we intimidate students into disliking poetry. Sharing a Poem of the Day across an entire school year has opened up a variety of forms, voices, cultural perspectives, sub-genres, and mentor texts that make poetry integral in my classroom.

Looking back as I begin my twentieth year of teaching English, my biggest regret is that I did not find a way to weave poetry more frequently into my practice during my early years. After a decade of doing this daily, it is hard to imagine any other way. But even if daily poetry exposure is not possible within the structure of the English curriculum where you teach, learning to slip and weave it into the fabric of our instruction through planned, regular poetry pauses can help our writers work with language in fresh, exciting ways that cultivate precision and patience as they craft their words.

POETRY PAUSES DEFINED

What is a poetry pause? Nothing complicated.

It is part of a class period, ranging from three minutes to an entire class period, when we learn in the presence of a poem. Sometimes it involves just giving ear to a beautiful combination of words and noticing something about how those words work. But often it is more. It likely involves some friendly discussion of a poem, some teasing out of its thinking, and a little bit of time writing alongside the poem in our writer's notebook, perhaps imitating one of the writer's craft moves. Many days it stirs some awakening for me, as my students notice facets of the poem that I overlooked. Poetry pauses allow for the frequent, gradual acquisition of skills that students can apply to their longer, more traditional academic writing.

Anyone can lead students to more skilled and precise writing with poetry pauses. I have neither an MFA nor a poetry chapbook to my name. I have always loved words, but that is a trait common among

English teachers. To invite poetry into your practice more often does not require you to be a reader or writer of poetry in your free time (though it may have that side effect), nor must you necessarily consider yourself a creative person. You do not need to be skilled in the surgical art of scansion or explication, though if you are, you can certainly draw upon that background. What it does require is setting aside your own preconceptions about poetry as an esoteric genre, perhaps borne of the same sorts of experiences as a student that I describe in the opening paragraphs of this book.

If we all have favorite songs that sing in our hearts and replay in our minds long after we listen to them with lyrics that stir us and echo through our daily experiences, then we are already poetry lovers, and primed to invite that same kind of heady delight into our classrooms. We simply need press pause now and then to give ourselves the room to do it.

Aside from the two common approaches to poetry described above, there is a third, valuable purpose for working with poems: to invite our students into writing. Interrupting our writing process with poetry pauses to read, explore, and write in our writer's notebooks can help students hone their own craft in all genres. We do not even need to expect that our students write particularly excellent poems to reap these rewards. And when we invite them to write in this genre more often, even if it cannot be daily exposure, their writing work more often crosses the line into excellence.

Ultimately, the writing process, we now acknowledge, is not quite as lockstep and linear as it was when my teachers first introduced it to me as a student in the early 1990s. Most writers do some revision while drafting. We might pause to reevaluate an outline as we revise. We brainstorm multiple ways to express or punctuate a thought as we edit. Neither are the modes of writing quite as clear-cut as we once taught them. Many excellent arguments include a thread of narrative, and an informative piece may include an infographic or other visual component at its core.

Writing requires nimbleness and pausing to write poetry or at least think poetically during assignments for academic classes can help students open new possibilities for their work and help that work to feel a bit more like play. In a 2018 commentary piece in *The Atlantic* called "Poetry Is Everywhere," Megan Garber points out that part of the resurgence of poetry comes from its uncanny ability to blur genre lines, like the "poetry meeting documentary" format of the PBS series *Poetry in America* or Rupi Kaur's enormously popular blend of artwork

and short verse on Instagram. Garber writes, “Poetry can’t die any more than air or water can meet such an end, because poetry in the more expansive sense is not ‘poetry’ in the narrow. Poetry is permeative; it is currency; and it is, thankfully, too big to die” (para. 5). This big, permeative nature allows teachers to channel its energy into every type of student writing.

Annesley Anderson, a tutor in a college writing center who works with students across all disciplines, published an article about how helpful short, creative prompts can be to struggling writers. Brief creative writing can become “a tool to disrupt students’ preconceived ideas about the writing process and boost writerly agency” (Anderson, 2020, para. 1). Poems provide the kind of healthy disruption a writer may need to filter out a main point from a flood of ideas or sharpen the language around a provocative claim. By shifting the angle from which we approach a writing task, we can help make success more attainable.

Creative pauses as catalysts for thought are not unique to the English classroom. Scientists value them, too. In a column titled “Writing Takes Work,” from the journal *Nature*, British geomorphologist Eli Lazarus (2017) notes that “even technical writing is a creative process” and “everyone can benefit from a good writers’ workshop” when navigating “the warrens of the writing process” (p. 291). In *Entangled Life*, his marvelously poetic book about fungi, Merlin Sheldrake (2020) affirms that “imagination forms part of the everyday business of inquiry . . . asking questions about a world that was never made to be catalogued and systematized” (p. 20). Expert in scientific communication Dr. Sam Illingworth (2022) suggests that scientific communication fails to reach some audiences because it alienates them up as “non-experts” and that poetry can “break down these barriers,” becoming “a conduit between the science and a wider audience” (paras. 7-8). The ability to shift to an imaginative, creative perspective and back again, valued among top scientists, can be nurtured by English teachers who, on a regular basis, pause for a poem.

To understand the potential that poetry has to help our students grow as writers, we will start to examine how infusing poems into our lessons more often can help students learn to think with poetry, feel more comfortable reading and discussing a poem, and notice the craft choices that make writing shine. Then in each subsequent chapter, we will look at how poetry pauses can be helpful to student writers at each stage of the writing process and in various modes of writing.

Along the way, I will share lots of favorite poems and pauses, some longer workshop lessons that help students tap into their creative energy and propel their writing, and some potential pitfalls to avoid.

WHY POETRY?

Daily poetry in the classroom is not a new or revolutionary idea. I first discovered it as an undergraduate student hearing about Billy Collins's poet laureate project, *Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools*. The project's concept was simple: read a poem daily with students to increase their exposure to the variety, the linguistic acrobatics, the beauty of poetry, and then do not kill it with commentary and analysis. Nancie Atwell says, "If ever I had to choose just one genre to teach in a middle school English program, it would be poetry. The lessons it teaches kids about good writing, about critical reading, about the kind of adults they wish to become and the kind of world they hope to inhabit, extend the best invitation I can imagine to grow up healthy and whole" (Atwell et al., 2013, n.p.). I am sure this idea was not new in the turn of the twenty-first century, and if I give Billy Collins or Nancie Atwell credit for creating the concept, I am certain a retired teacher from the 1970s will send me an e-mail about how they followed this same routine decades ago.

Teachers know that a simple routine can anchor a class. A close friend and math teacher uses a quote projected on the screen to discuss each day and build community before diving into algebra. Another friend uses a word of the day routine to build vocabulary. These simple brushstrokes can become a teacher's signature on a course, and Poem of the Day has become mine.

Starting this routine, I discovered there was something elemental about poetry. I discovered that nearly everything else I needed to impart about writing well could be tucked into a succinct lesson efficiently and intensely with the help of a poem. And it all started by just welcoming more of this genre into our space, gaining comfort with reading it, listening to it, watching it performed, and writing it.

At present, poetry is experiencing a renaissance and reinvention as poems go viral on Facebook and "Instapoets" blend imagery and brief verse in perfect shareable squares. Patrick Stewart shared Shakespeare sonnet read-alouds with the world during the COVID-19 pandemic and Brandon Leake stole America's heart as the first spoken-word poet to rise to fame on *America's Got Talent*; the *Ours Poetica* series on YouTube brings us famous people's favorite poetry while Terrence

Hayes showed up in an advertisement for Dove and Amanda Gorman made the cover of *Vogue*. There is, as poet Craig Morgan Teicher puts it, “a robust culture of sharing poetry online and young people have taken control of how they consume literature” (as cited in Lund, 2021, para. 15). It makes sense for our classrooms to embrace poetry right now. The world beyond our classrooms has already opened its arms.

What makes poetry so valuable in helping us to teach writers? A few things.

- 1. Poems are (often) short.** This means they can demonstrate a key writing skill we want students to apply more efficiently than longer genres. No one feels like they have extra time lying around to try a new strategy, but employing poetry pauses asks for only a few precious minutes of class time with the promise of exponential returns in our students’ writing.
- 2. Poems are rich.** This means each word counts for more. As Rita Dove puts it, “poetry is language at its most distilled and powerful.” Reading and writing poems regularly helps our students tune in to the nuance of individual words. Distilled, powerful language strengthens any piece of writing, not just poetry.
- 3. Poems connect to our other reading.** We can often find in poems thematic echoes of the longer works we study in class. This gives us the chance to look at how more than one text handles a topic and perceive varied approaches as we enter “a vast conversation spanning thousands of years” (Teicher, quoted in Lund, 2021, para. 17). It also helps us dovetail reading, writing, speaking, and listening standards in our curriculum.
- 4. Poems contain patterns.** Like music, poems rely on rhythm, repetition, and sound to convey ideas. Writing in all sorts of genres is described as “poetic” when a reviewer wants to commend the sound and texture of a writer’s work. Working with patterns can help students quickly improve their writing with sound effects to heighten a reader’s attention and underscore main ideas and turning points in their work.
- 5. Poems engage our neurology in exciting ways.** Researchers now know that after reading poems with metaphors that require particularly bold leaps of the imagination, high school students demonstrate improved fluency and flexibility, important measures of creativity (Osowiecka & Kolanczyk, 2018). We know that poetry can elicit chills and goosebumps, and when these are measured via neuroimaging, they touch our brain’s reward centers in ways

that are akin to, but different from, listening to music. Even test subjects unaccustomed to reading poetry experienced these neurological outcomes (Wassiliwizky et al., 2017).

- 6. Poems invite diverse voices.** Because of poems' brevity, reading poetry frequently and using poems as mentors make it easy to introduce a wide array of cultures from all around the world over the course of an academic term. For many of my students, Poem of the Day marks their first time reading a piece of literature from South America, Africa, or North America's First Peoples. It embeds work that has been published days or weeks ago. This improves our students' opportunities to learn from some writers who have lived experiences different from their own.

For seven years, I have been writing and publishing brief pieces about the value that frequent work with poetry adds to an English class. In 2016, I started an annual blogging project for National Poetry Month in the United States called *Go Poems* and invited teachers from throughout North America to join me. The project highlights how short poetry pauses can provide portals to deeper thinking and writing with secondary students from any grade level. Curating posts from colleagues gave me the opportunity to learn what poetry pauses can look like in schools in Newark (NJ) and Edmond (OK), Dallas and Ontario, in urban schools, rural schools, and in each region of the continent with students from diverse backgrounds. It has been heartening to notice the common threads listed earlier and the ease and enthusiasm with which teachers are introducing this simple practice into their classrooms.

We are all busy, working through overstuffed curriculum, demanding standards, and inflexible schedules for standardized tests which have, in some cases, removed poetry from the eligible content. But when something offers us an influence that radiates through *everything* students write, not just an impactful lesson for an assignment or a particular genre, it is worth the relatively narrow investment of time.

Try opening little nooks of space for poetry, daily if possible. For the first week or two share a different poem each day. Choose poems so short that you can read them or listen to them out loud twice in five minutes. Many potent poems are so short that two readings take less time than five minutes! I am thrilled to share and exemplify the impact that pausing for poems has had on my classroom and my student writers, and I hope you will find many ideas to apply within these pages.



Scan this QR code to check out my Go Poems project that ran from 2016-2022.