

# Teacher to Teacher

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## Writing Poetry

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When ABLÉ teachers think about writing instruction, preparation for the GED essay is often foremost in their thoughts. This is an important goal for most students, to be sure, but to limit writing instruction in this manner does students a disservice. Writing can serve many more functions in our lives, so effective ABLÉ instruction should support many types of writing and help students see the benefits of becoming lifelong writers. Writing poetry, the focus of this publication, offers students an easy entry into the writers' world.



### Class Poems

Writing a *class poem* is a good way to introduce poetry writing to students (Padak, 2001). To prepare, you'll need index cards or small slips of paper and a chalkboard/ whiteboard or chart paper. Together with students, decide on a topic for the poem. A good topic will evoke sensory images, say a child's birthday party or Thanksgiving dinner. Write the topic on the board or chart paper, then invite students to think of words and phrases related to the topic. Write these on the chart and, if necessary, prompt students' thinking. Using the birthday party example, you could ask, Who was there? What happened? How did it sound? How did you feel? And so forth.

Now give each student two or three cards, and ask him or her to write a favorite phrase (or combine words to make a new one) on each card. Collect the cards, and read the poem! You might even want to shuffle the cards a couple of times to create new poems from the same words/ phrases. This activity will also provide you with opportunities to help students see that poetry doesn't need to rhyme.

### Found Poems (Ruurs, 2009)

One version of a *found poem* has students selecting a topic and then searching through magazines or newspapers for words and phrases, which they then assemble into poem format. (They can even cut these words out and paste them to paper so that the resulting poem resembles the anonymous ransom notes we see on TV.) An adaptation is for students to select what they believe to be important words from a book or article. These are put on separate pieces of paper and arranged into a poem.

### Copy Change

*Copy change* involves students using another author's framework to create their own poems. (For more information, see [http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/copy\\_change09.pdf](http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/copy_change09.pdf)). One poem that you might use to introduce copy change to students is William Carlos Williams's famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," which was published in 1923:

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### The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

You can read this poem to and with students a couple of times and then draw students' attention to lines 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and 7 and 8. Ask students to talk about how lines 5 and 6 and also 7 and 8 relate to lines 3 and 4 (5-6: describes 3 and 4; 7-8: provides setting or location for 3-4).

With this information, individuals or pairs of students are now ready to use "The Red Wheelbarrow" frame to create their own poems. They can use Williams's first two lines, then decide on a topic for their poem to write in lines 3 and 4. Descriptions (lines 5 and 6) and settings/ locations (lines 7 and 8) can follow.

After students understand the concept of copy change, you can invite them to find and share other poems that could be used for copy change. You can also encourage students to use the strategy independently in their own writing.

### Biopoems

The *biopoem* (Gere, 1985; see <http://literacykent.edu/eureka/strategies/biopoems09.pdf>) offers a framework for synthesizing what students have learned about a person, group, event, concept—almost anything they study. The lines for the biopoem can include name; location in time or place; relatives (or related concepts); and lists of needs, wants, fears, hopes, important contributions—whatever the teacher or students decide would provide a useful framework. Here, for example, is a biopoem based on *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999):

Bud  
Thoughtful, persistent, funny, lonely  
Relative of Mama and Herman  
Who feels alone  
Who needs a family  
Who fears foster homes, the dark, and monsters  
Residents of Michigan in the 1930's  
Not Buddy

### Name Poems or Acrostics

These poems use letters of a name or word to begin lines of a poem. Steven Schnur has written two books using this framework, *Autumn* (1997) and *Winter* (2002). You may want to check these out of your local library to share with students. Students can develop name poems for themselves or their family members, or they can use this framework to respond to their reading or learning in science or social studies. Here, for example, is a name poem about spiders. Note that the first letters of the lines spell the word "spider":

Spin webs of silk  
Predatory; they prey on insects  
Invertebrates  
Digestion begins with the spider's bite  
Embryos live in egg sacks  
Recluse spiders are quite poisonous for people

### Shape Poems

These poems, sometimes called concrete poems, take the physical shape of the topic of the poem. Students select an object to portray and then brainstorm words and phrases related to it. These are arranged on the page so that collectively, the words create an outline of the object.

### "I" Poems (Kucan, 2007)

*I poems* can be written about individuals, friends or family members, or even pets. Students can also focus on a character, either an individual or a group, from their fiction or informational reading. They may select any of the following to develop lines for their poems, or you may want to specify that they use line 1 and at least 3 others:

I am  
I wonder  
I hear  
I see  
I want  
I pretend  
I feel  
I touch  
I worry  
I cry  
I understand  
I say  
I dream

For example, imagine that students have read about Martin Luther King, Jr. Some lines of an I poem about him could be:

I am Martin Luther King, Jr.

I wonder if the racism will stop.  
I see thousands of people listening to my  
speeches.  
I dream of a time when all people are free.

### I Used To/ But Now Poems

For many years, Ken Koch (2000) has worked to support students' poetry writing. In *I Used To/ But Now poems* students compare past and present (or appearances and reality) by listing issues, ideas, or aspects of themselves. Poem topics could be "I used to think.../But now I know..." or "I used to be... /But now I am..." or "I seem to be.../But really I am..." This framework can also be used to respond to reading, for example by focusing on how a character changes throughout a book or how some event in history affected life. (Imagine a "We used to.../ But now..." poem related to 9/11, for example).

### Diamante

*Diamantes* are named for their diamond-shaped form:

noun  
adj. adj. adj.  
-ing verb -ing verb -ing verb  
adj. adj. adj.  
noun

Students can write diamantes about themselves or their family members, or they can use this framework for responding to their reading. Here, for example, is a diamante based on Katherine Paterson's *Bread and Roses, Too* (2006), a young adult novel about the famous mill strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912:

Bread  
Hungry Underpaid  
Singing Joining together Persevering  
Persistent Courageous  
Strike

### Poems by Definition (Ruurs, 2009)

Poetry can even invade vocabulary study! Ask each student to select one difficult word from his or her reading. Then students look in dictionaries and other resources to find words and phrases related to the word. These can be written on separate pieces of paper.

Students should arrange their slips of paper to create poems. The words can be arranged any way students wish, or they can use frames, such as what the word is/is not, what it can/ cannot do or be, positive / negative words about the word, synonyms/ antonyms—anything else that can be expressed in opposites.

### Poetry and Writing

The ten poetry writing ideas presented above share several common features. Each is adaptable to learners at a variety of achievement levels, from very beginning readers/ writers to GED-preparation students. Moreover, teachers can easily scaffold or support students' understanding of each type of poem in a brief instructional session, after which students should be able to write poems independently. Further, several of these poetry writing ideas link reading and writing, so poetry can provide an effective response to reading, and students can learn to read like writers. Each of these poems might be introduced in a whole-group lesson. Making class or individual poetry books is a great way to encourage others to read students' poetry and to celebrate students as authors.

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