



"Poetry is Contagious":

How I Teach My Students to Write Award-Winning Poetry

Betsey Coleman



Despite an explosion of helpful writing texts, audiences, and standards/assessments about the writing of poetry in high schools, students still greet their teacher's "now we are going to write a poem" announcement with groans and rolling eyes. My students don't always love the poetry we read and perform, but they really do enjoy writing it—although not on day one! I hear the same complaints that other teachers hear: "I could never write a poem" or "I've never liked poetry" or "I'm not good at rhyming." Yet if you give teens frequent and varied opportunities to write, many models, a variety of forms and techniques, and most important, multiple audiences—they will become poets.

In the freshman year, I teach a four-week poetry unit that also includes reading, discussing, and performing poetry. In addition, writing poetry has become a pervasive part of my ninth-grade curriculum, beginning in September with an autobiographical effort and continuing in October with a fairy tale poem related to a literature unit on fairy tales. In November, I begin The Unit.

I always start teaching the writing of poetry with a few rules and expectations: no rhyming (although I lighten up about that later); lots of sensory, concrete detail; required brainstorming; evaluation criteria; and the promise of an

audience, often one outside our school community.

Then I present the models: the poems themselves written by professionals, but more important, by past students. I have collected folders—both hard copy and computer files—full of my students' work during the past twenty years. I usually begin an exercise with a professional poet followed by a number of student examples. Each year I add poems to the collection. Instead of saying, "That one was written by my student in Canada fifteen years ago," I say, "You know the author of this one—it's Caitlin, the junior whose mother teaches in the Lower School."

Using a large variety of forms and techniques is very important. Among the many resources for these assignments are my favorites: Joseph I. Tsujimoto's **Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents**, Florence Grossman's **Getting from Here to There: Writing and Reading Poetry**, and Steve Kowitz's **In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop** (see complete citations in the resource list at the end of this article). Some of the more successful poetry types and forms that I use are punctuation/sign poems, color poems, fairy tale poems, form/reference poems, person-as-inanimate-object poems, list poems, neighborhood poems, portrait and self portrait poems, circle poems, and image poems. Once you start reading and collecting, you will find infinite patterns and poets to imitate. This year I experimented with a "How I Knew Harold" poem modeled on the poem by Deborah Harding in Kowitz's book. The results? I have a crop of highly individual and entertaining poems plus new models for next year's students.

The following three sections outline some my most successful writing assignments, with resources, guidelines for teaching, assessment sheets, and samples of each type of poem. The poems are written by my freshmen past and present.

Form Poem

Resource: Joseph I. Tsujimoto's **Teaching Poetry to Adolescents**, "Chapter 15: Form Poem."

Guidelines

Ask the students to write a poem using a common reference form such as a dictionary, bibliography, transcript, warning label, dedication, health record, or prescription. Ask your librarian to assemble these reference forms, giving the students time in class to look at them and brainstorm ideas. Initially they find this form poem daunting, but the results are some of the most spirited and original that I receive each year. Their titles reflect the inventiveness of the poems: "Machine Washable Romeo and Juliet," "Horoscope of a Freshman," "HTML: How To Minimize Loserness," "A Warning About This Poem," and "Terms of Poetry."

Sample Poem

Rates of Exchange for Older Brothers

- 1 punch to the face = 2 hours of satisfaction
- 1 hour of satisfaction = 1 date at the movies
- 1 date at the movies = 2 weeks of planning
- 2 weeks of planning = 1 oral presentation
- 1 oral presentation = 4 minutes of pain

- 1 punch to the face = 4 minutes of pain
- Bill Elder

Assessment Sheet

- 1. One page of dense brainstorming with lots of concrete detail /5
 - 2. Original idea/structure/form /5
 - 3. Editing/mechanics/accuracy /5
 - 4. Use of poetic devices: figurative language; sound devices (not end rhyme) such as repetition, alliteration, consonance, assonance, internal rhyme /5
- /20



The Person-As-Inanimate-Object Poem



Resource: Florence Grossman's *Getting From Here to There: Writing and Reading Poetry*, "Chapter 6: People."

Guidelines

Grossman asks the student to picture someone she knows as an inanimate object. Then she uses George Macbeth's "Marshall" with its first line: "It occurred to Marshall that if he were a vegetable, he'd be a bean." This poem is really an extended metaphor. I used to assign "metaphor" or "simile" poems, using lots of professional and student models, but the person-as-inanimate-object poem is a more focused assignment that generates stronger poems with lots of personality. Grossman's chapter has many other great suggestions about using people and their pastimes or jobs to write poetry. My students have written poems about people as carrots, artichokes, pumpkins, and even scarves!

Sample Poem

Banana

She stands
With her rounded back,
Long blonde hair,
And matching yellow dress.

It's unlikely
She would ever be found alone.
One of the bunch
As she laughs with her friends.
She looks happy.

But is she?

Her insides are soft.
She bruises easily,
Her skin and heart
Turning black with
Every blow.
—Hannah Rasmussen

Assessment Sheet

1. This poem is based on an extended metaphor. Within the extended metaphor, there is a series of short comparisons (metaphors, similes, personifications). Have you used some? /5
 2. Strong sensory detail/images /5
 3. Brainstorming /5
 4. Interesting structure, line length, verse form, or use of punctuation /5
- /20

Punctuation/Sign Poem

Resource: Florence Grossman's *Getting From Here to There: Writing and Reading Poetry*, "Chapter 4: Signs."

Guidelines

I do this poem every year and have never seen such a variety of successful poems based on one assignment. Students choose and write poems about letters, numbers, geometric figures, or punctuation marks, which Grossman says are "things which, if you let them, lead lives of their own." Grossman's chapter has many models for this poem, but it is my collection of student poems that

inspires my freshmen every fall. They can use one sign/symbol or a number of different ones. The images in their poems may be connected through meaning or narrative or stand as a list of interesting details and associations on their own. A good suggestion for this assignment is to tell them to begin with some imaginative associations and then tell a story about their character/sign. Some in-class enforced brainstorming helps on the day you assign this poem.

Sample Poem

*

A star fallen from above.
Not quite good enough to perch atop this world's purple-black night sky.
Never again will it shine its light down from the darkened heavens
Giving an unearthly glow to the slush in the gutters
On a night when steam rises from the manhole covers in the streets
When the only audible sound is a single far-off car driving toward
somewhere else
And one by one, the lofty skyscraper deities close their illuminated eyes.
It has been banned from the mellow life of a star.
No more can it protect our atmosphere from possible invaders.
No more can it help guide a cold, tired traveler.
It has been assigned to the worldly task of punctuation.
Its sole job to remind us that there is a catch.
Something else we must consider.
One last fact.
Yet it still sits just a little bit higher than the other letters,
Waiting for the day when the message will be delivered
That it can return to its life as a star
And calmly sit on top of it all
And watch the world go to sleep.
—Tim Horgan-Kobelski



Assessment Sheet

Brainstorming is particularly important for this poem. Fresh comparisons and imaginative associations are everything. You may write one medium-sized poem or several short ones. You need to pick a series of signs/symbols or one which can be recognized by a general

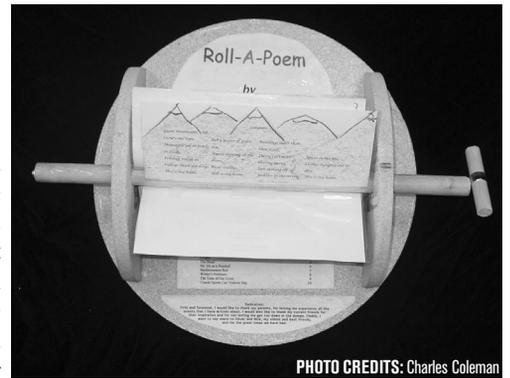
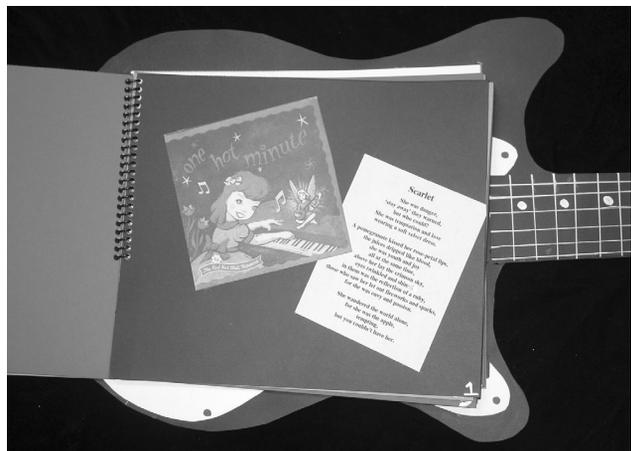


PHOTO CREDITS: Charles Coleman



different squares of poems, and a planetary system of poems. The titles of these anthologies reflect the voices of individual students: “Shards of Poetry,” “Poetry in Motion,” “The Jungle of Words,” “Pulled Out of the Fire,” “Poetry Out to Dry,” “From the Heart to the Brain,” “Thirteen Leaves from the Poetry Tree,” and “Pathway to the Soul.” (All illustrations in this article show my students’ anthologies.) I do warn my poets that their powers of invention should not interfere with the reader’s appreciation of their poems!

Guidelines for Poetry Anthology Project

- Encourage students to be creative but not to spend a lot of money.
- Tell them it’s not necessary to be a graphic artist to be creative.
- Discourage computer graphics. Using a few is acceptable, but this is not a desktop publishing exercise.
- Show models from previous years.
- Allow many formats, not just books—but caution students not to let the format overwhelm the poetry.
- Emphasize the importance of an eye-catching cover with an original title and full names clearly visible.
- Require a dedication and a table of contents with titles or first lines and page numbers.

audience. Don’t handicap yourselves by picking something too obscure. Let your free-associating imaginations free!

1. Brainstorming /5
2. Concrete details /5
3. Interesting structure and poetic devices/5
4. Originality/risk /20

Tips for Student Submissions to Contests or Publications

- Students choose which poems they want to submit.
- They send a variety of poems to different audiences, but are *required* to submit frequently as part of the course and grade.
- Students must keep poems in a folder on the school server or an electronic portfolio.
- As the teacher, type out submission instructions ahead, give a homework grade, and have envelopes ready for submission—or ask a few students to help you address them.

- Ask for a separate page for each poem.
- Warn them not to label the “type” of poem (such as sign or color).
- If you can, require your students to make a plan and hand in sections over a period of time. (The first section might contain the title page, dedication, and table of contents.) Such sectioning will be impossible for some students because of their “concept,” but it avoids some all-nighters!
- Ask your department or school to laminate covers and ring bind. Most students will want to put their own anthologies together.
- Display! Display! Display! We display anthologies in the principal’s office, my classroom, the library, the faculty lounge—anywhere we find room.

The Personal Poetry Anthology

All this writing of poetry culminates in a personal poetry anthology, which has become a rite of passage for our freshmen. When my students have finished writing, they will have ten to thirteen poems. Before they gather their work together, I show them projects from the previous year. I reserve the right to keep poetry anthologies for up to one year, because the success of this part of the project depends on students seeing the remarkable creations of those who have gone before them.

Although it began as a book, the anthology has taken on a life of its own, appearing in many formats. Each year my students’ innovation astonishes me. I have received many extraordinary collections including a train of poems, a puzzle of poems, a laundry line of poems, a head with poems on pipe cleaners springing from the cranium, a popup box of poems, a quilt with

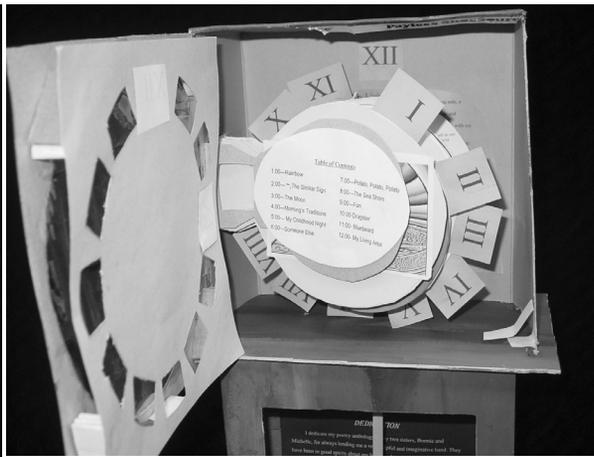
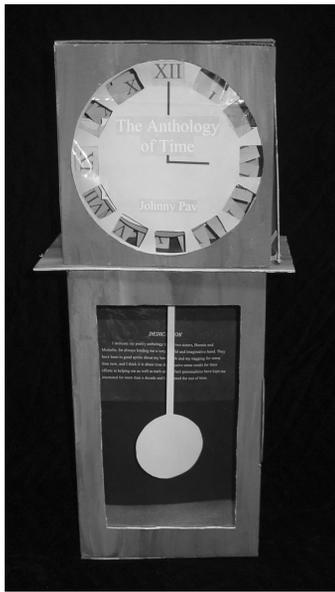
Anthology Assessment Sheet Suggestions

1. Poetry: This grade will be an average of all your poems; therefore, this part of the grade is already determined.
2. Design and layout: Effective relationship between text and art; freshness.
3. Risk and originality.
4. Neatness and accuracy: Tidy layout and correct grammar and spelling.
5. Front page: Cover design, title, full name (clearly visible) interest.

Audience

What becomes the most important motivator in making a successful teenage poet is audience, whether it be sharing a personal anthology within the school community through the school’s publications, contests, newsletters, or assemblies; through outside Web sites; or through regional contests such as those held by bookstores (in our case, Denver’s Tattered Cover); or national publications, including online magazines or **TeenInk**; or national contests such as the Scholastic Writing Awards or **VOYA**’s Teen Poetry Contest.





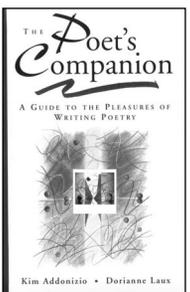
Nuts and Bolts Tips for Teachers

- Make grading easy. Revision of selected poems and editing for contest submissions is important, but keep it moving and keep them writing! Do not require lots of drafts. Do require lots of poems.
- Save poems on the school's server for contest purposes. Consider starting an electronic portfolio for each student or burning a CD at the end of the year.
- Require students to submit their poems; don't give them the option! They will always be proud to have their names in print.
- Save personal poetry anthologies to show to next year's class.
- Have students e-mail poems to you. Begin a Web page with your students' work.
- Model, require, and grade brainstorming. I give 5 points out of 20 or 25 for filling up one page with lists and ideas. It is really an effort mark.
- Create a brief assessment sheet for each poem assigned.
- Create packets of student models for each type of poem. Add current student work each year.
- Try at least two new types or forms of poetry each year.

Recommended Resources

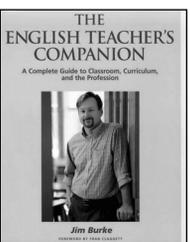
Addonizio, Kim, and Laux, Dorianne. **The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry.** W. W. Norton, 1997. 284p. \$13.95 Trade pb. 0-393-31654-8.

Addonizio and Laux begin their guide with subjects for writing poetry that would help any poet suffering from writer's block. Their "Twenty-Minute Writing Exercises" section gives the instructor something new to begin each day. Addressing adult poets, this book's poems and brainstorming ideas can be very mature, and must be used selectively with teens.



Burke, Jim. **The English Teacher's Companion: A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession.** 2nd Edition. Heinemann, 2003. 466p. \$32.50 pb. 0-325-00538-9. VOYA December 2003.

The "Creative Writing: Drama, Fiction, and Poetry" chapter has the usual suggestions about list poems and found poems but also some newer, more interesting ideas such as "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters," "The Irish Curse Poem," "Journal Poem," "Ancient Chinese and Japanese Poems," and "Letter Poem." Burke's use of classic literature (Huckleberry Finn, Neruda, Pound) combined with different forms makes his writing ideas intriguing.



From Individual Classroom Project to School-Wide Program

At Colorado Academy the language arts teachers have succeeded in stimulating enthusiasm throughout the school for the writing of poetry. This electricity begins with teachers in their individual classrooms, but it is also communicated through an annual school-wide cross-divisional poetry project. Three years ago, teachers from kindergarten through twelfth grade began connecting their classes with George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From," continued last year with Sandra Cisneros's "Abuelito Who," and have just finished writing poems using photographs as a means of inspiration.

The audiences for this project are reached via the walls and halls of classrooms and in the Lower, Middle, and Upper Schools as well as Colorado Academy's monthly newsletter, Web page, and divisional literary magazines. Sometimes the audience goes beyond our school. In 2002, one student, Lauren Friedland, won a silver Scholastic Writing award for her "Where I'm From" poem, "A Voyage." She and her poem were featured in the April 2004 poetry issue of Scholastic's **Literary Cavalcade**. (**Editor's Note:** Friedland's poem, "Perspective," was a winner in VOYA's Teen Poetry Contest 2002 on page 24 of the April 2003 issue.)

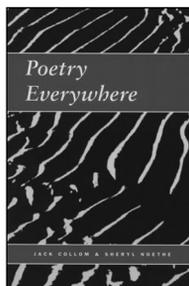
The Students' Definition of Poetry

Each year at the end of the formal poetry unit, I ask my students as a class to invent a definition of poetry, which they present at an annual school poetry performance. It reveals what they think about poetry and about writing it, as well as their momentous change in attitude from that first "I can't write poetry" day. Last year's freshmen created this definition:

Poetry is . . .

. . . emotions spilling out in cryptic lines; a fragment of a bigger story; necessary; words woven together; contagious; a way to sound smart; threadbare prose; coffee at midnight; the gratuitous use of gargantuan words; an oasis in the desert of expository writing; a carpet—you never know where it will take you; the point of the literary sword; old slave songs and codes in disguise; punctuation gone horribly wrong; a calliope of words; hockey in the cool winter air, cold forks in warm pie; a room with mice in the carpet; archaeology of the soul; soft as feathers, sharp as needles; joy and laughter cut down to size; shattered dreams and expectations fulfilled.

Collom, Jack, and Sheryl Noethe. **Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community.** Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1994. 252p. \$17.95 Trade pb. 0-915924-98-6.



Collom and Noethe's book is an old standby with a zillion different ideas, themes, and forms to inspire young poets. Some of these are better suited to younger writers, but most can be adapted to older students. Included are strong suggestions for poetry collaboration, revision of poems, and teaching students of different ages.

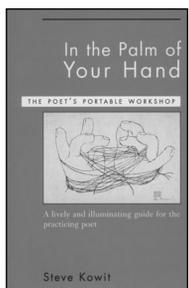
Dunning, Stephen, and William Stafford. **Getting the Knack: 20 Poetry Writing Exercises.** National Council of Teachers of English, 1992. 202p. \$19.95. 0-8141-1848-

8. *Dunning and Stafford's exercises have more depth than many texts of this sort. For each exercise such as "Memory Map 2" (which I call a neighborhood poem), they supply a great number of student models to get you kick-started. More important, they explain in careful steps how to take a poem from an idea or a subject to a fully developed, revised work of art.*

Grossman, Florence. **Getting from Here to There: Writing and Reading Poetry.** Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1982. 171p. \$21. pb. 0-86709-033-2.

One of the two books (see Tsujimoto for the other one) with which I began teaching the writing of poetry, it still is one of my favorites for the number of inspiring forms and subjects (signs, people, clothes, persona, and dreams) and the wealth of professional and student models that Grossman uses to explain her themes and lessons.

Kowitz, Steve. **In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop.** Tilbury House Publishers, 1995. 288p. \$14.95 Trade pb. 0-88448-149-2.



This book is full of accessible poetry, detailed assignments, and clear guidelines, but high school teachers and librarians need to be selective about what to use with students. Kowitz writes for older poets, including material that some might find objectionable. He offers excellent suggestions for gathering memories. The "How I Knew Harold" poem is a wonderful combination of poetry and prose. The "Family Secrets: The Poem as Photograph" chapter provides strong ideas for the poem based on a photograph.

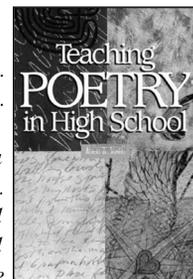


Literary Cavalcade: Literature and Writing for College-Bound Teens. Scholastic, Inc. Teachers Edition Editor: Heather Ordovery. 9 issues a year. \$8.99 each per school year for 10 or more subscriptions.

I have used this magazine aimed at upper-level high school students since I began teaching, and now have a file full of carefully delineated poetry-writing assignments. It is also an excellent resource for creative prose. Each month there is a section called "Writing" or "Writing from Models" or "Poetry Unzipped" or "Student Writing" that explains how to write poetry, prose, or analytical essays. The editors make heavy use of student writing chosen from their annual Scholastic Art and Writing Awards contest.

Somers, Albert B. **Teaching Poetry in High School.** National Council of Teachers of English, 1999. 219p. \$26.95 Trade pb. 0-8141-5289-9. VOYA June 2000.

Somers's guidance is invaluable for anything you want to know about teaching poetry in high school. He covers what poems to teach and how to find them, performing poetry, writing poetry, poetry and the Internet, and teaching poetry across the curriculum. A strong feature is highlighted boxes that provide more resources than you will find anywhere else.



Tsujimoto, Joseph I. **Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents.** National Council of Teachers of English, 1988. 105p. O.P. \$8.95. 0-8141-5226-0.

This is my other favorite resource (see Grossman) because of the number and variety of Tsujimoto's assignments. He relies on his middle school students' poetry, which is variable in quality but usually strong. I have used many of his suggestions with great success: the "Transformation Poem," "List of Twelve," "Memory Poem," "Bitterness Poem," "Form Poem," and "Self Portrait." The "Self Portrait" poem is excellent to use in September to set the poetry ball rolling.

*Betsy Coleman teaches English to freshmen and is the department chair for upper-school students at Colorado Academy in Denver, Colorado. She has been teaching students to write poetry for thirty years, the last ten years in Colorado. Her students' poetry graces her classroom walls, her school halls, and national publications such as Scholastic's **Literary Cavalcade**. Some of these poems have been published as finalists in every VOYA Teen Poetry Contest since the contests began in 1999.*

