

Poetry Alive handout: Favorite poems and prompts

Joshua Gottlieb-Miller:

Concrete and Experimental Poem prompt

We'll start by reading an experimental, concrete poem: "Obligations 2," by Layli Long Soldier ([Obligations 2 by Layli Long Soldier | Poetry Foundation](#)).

I like to let the students read through the poem in a few different directions. I saw Long Soldier read this piece at the all-virtual AWP, a few years ago. She talked about finding inspiration in star quilts: ([Quilts by Layli Long Soldier | Poetry Magazine \(poetryfoundation.org\)](#)). I also provide the context that Long Soldier is a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation.

I give the students a bit of background on concrete poetry: concrete poetry lets the visual shape of the poem convey its meaning, as much as the words. Concrete poets use patterns of words or letters and other typographical devices, even just the blank space of the page, to create layers of possible readings. The whole field of the page is charged with potential energy. Concrete poetry is also fun! Playing around with the poem's visual appearance can be a great way to explore what poems can do. We might look at other examples of concrete or shape poetry. We can look closely at a few others, or just tour through some of the shapes (I pick out poems in advance, but you can even just look at the "images" tab on Google when you search for concrete poems).

I talk about my own inspiration in writing concrete, experimental poetry, as a Jewish poet thinking about the visual traditions of Talmud.

Then we brainstorm their own possibilities, followed by writing time. Here are a few exercises, if they get stuck:

- Think about an object that has meaning to you: a basketball or guitar or easel or computer. Sketch out that shape and then write a poem along the lines of the object.
- Think about a visual that has meaning to you: a football field or music sheet or map.

Sketch out that shape and then write a poem along the lines of the visual field.

- Have your students trace the outlines of their hands; a partner might help them. Ask them to study their palms closely and try to draw as many of the lines they see. Ask them what their hands are good at, playing piano, making cookies, video games, etc. and what they wish their hands could do better, write cursive, catch flies, etc. Encourage the students to write around or over the drawings of their hands.
- Play with white space. Your concrete poem can use a specific object or visual, but you can also draw a diagram, or just move things around.
- Think about how different shapes might cause people to read the poem in different orders:

What if you write in all four corners?

What if you use arrows to point people in unusual directions?

What if you use circles or shadows?

Ask the students, at the end, what other experiments can you think of?

Donna Vorreyer:

Tri-Color Poetry Annotations (from teachlivingpoets.com)

Other favorites to teach middle schoolers:

Ode to Cheese Fries by Jose Olivarez

To the Notebook Kid by Eve Ewing

The Dungeon Master's Guide to Eighth Grade by Amorak Huey

Dance Stupider by Hannah Stephenson

Orchids are Sprouting from the Floorboards by Kaveh Akbar

Burning the Old Year by Naomi Shihab Nye

Hulk Smash!" by Greg Santos

Melissa Smith:

Favorite lesson plans:

Poetry analysis using color

Visual representation analysis inspired by Kaveh Akbar

Threading poems

Hexagonal thinking

Tone bottles

Favorite prompt:

Shades of Green (from teachlivingpoets.com)

Favorite resource:

<https://teachlivingpoets.com/virtual-library/>

Becca Rose Hall:

Color/Feeling Poems (The Happiness of Ice-cream and Piano Keys from afewcrookedwords.substack.com)

Backwards Odes (from afewcrookedwords.substack.com)

Other favorite poems with elementary/middle schoolers:

Orchids Are Sprouting from the Floorboards by Kaveh Akbar (repetition/breaking repetition)

Ode to Herb Kent by Jamila Woods

To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian by Ross Gay (as an ode)

The Lost Words (esp "Heron" and "Heather") by Robert MacFarlane (sounds and animal acrostics)

Anne Carson's translations of Sappho (found word poems)

Declaration by Tracy K Smith (erasures)

Lauren Gives me Directions by Garrett Durbin (memory map poems)