



Teaching the Poetry of Rivers

by Kathryn Winograd

Teaching the Poetry of Rivers is a literacy venture supporting the nationally renowned River of Words poetry and art contest, an annual environmental contest for children ages 5 through 19, sponsored by the Library of Congress and locally by Colorado Humanities & Center for the Book. Integrating poetry, water resource science, and the humanities, it supports teachers' promotion of literacy and environmental stewardship in their classrooms. It aims to provide students with the means for exploring the natural and cultural history of the places they live, and to express their discoveries of place and self through poetry. The River of Words poetry and art contest offers students the opportunity to submit their

work in a state and national competition. Teaching the Poetry of Rivers is provided free of charge by Colorado Humanities & Center for the Book, with initial support provided by the Colorado Foundation for Water Education. Teaching the Poetry of Rivers was initially developed by poet and teacher, Dr. Kathryn Winograd, the 2002 Colorado Book Award Winner for Poetry. This resource can also be found at coloradohumanities.org/content/river-words.

Teaching the Poetry of Rivers provides:

Five self-paced lesson plans integrating culture, history, poetry and watershed science.

Step-by-step instruction for teaching your students the process of writing poetry.

Readings, activities, photographs and Internet links related to each lesson.

Suggestions to modify the lessons for different grade levels.

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From Journal to Poetry— Writing the List Poem

Where do poems begin?

With the eyes, the ears, the hand, and the heart. Poets don't wait for inspiration; they find inspiration through their explorations of the world around them. Many begin with the journal: their handwritten recordings of what they see, hear and feel.

For this lesson, ask your students to explore a favorite nature spot, preferably one with water. Ask them to create journal entries of their observations of how they and other living beings co-exist. The model for their journals might be the journals of John Wesley Powell, who explored the then unknown Colorado River in 1800s and published his journals as the wildly popular *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries* in 1869.

Your students' journals will become the basis of their first poems. By comparing and contrasting Powell's journal selections with Walt Whitman's poem, "There Was a Child Went Forth" (1890), they will discover the transforming elements of poetry—what can distinguish poetry from prose. Then using their journal observations, they will compose a type of poem called the list poem, modeling theirs after Whitman's poem, and focusing on using concrete specific language, the names of things that they have discovered in their biosphere exploration, and formal elements of the list poem such as repetition, rhythm, and sound patterns.

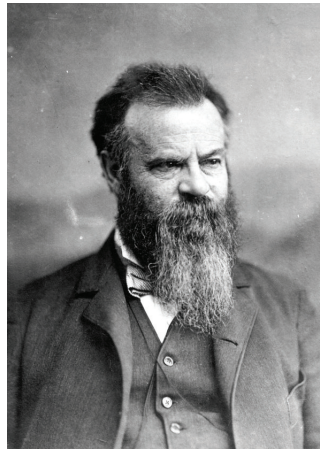
As part of these science extension activities, your students will also be provided with ecological terms and definitions to further describe their experience outdoors. Field guides can assist in identifying what they see.

Underlying your neighborhood is a living ecosystem known as a bioregion. Bioregions are defined by landforms, distinct communities of plants and animals, and a degree of biological sustainability. Watersheds are a vital component of your bioregion. Student journals will record their exploration of their bioregion and include both a hand-drawn map of a specific location in their watershed together with written observations.

Before you delve into the Resources and Assignments for the List Poem, take a moment and listen to Walt Whitman reading from his poem, "America" at whitmanarchive.org/audio

Creating a Nature Journal

A large number of writers keep journals. Poets have been known to keep tattered notebooks and scraps of paper in their pockets at all times to write down what they see and hear and feel at any moment of the day or night. Poets use journals to record the names of things, to help them remember specific details of what they have seen, and to write down what they might learn in books and other other texts. All of this information is then used to create poems. There are many famous journals in our country's history, but certainly John Wesley Powell's journals, published



as *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries* (1869) and written during his journey down the Grand Canyon, made quite a stir. Powell's journal is striking for its keen-eyed detail as he recreates what he sees, hears, and feels in specific, concrete language, bringing the world of the canyon to life upon the page.

The journal exercise leads your students through the creation of their own journals, which will open them to the place where they live. The journal can be a two-part exercise: the creation of a map and the recording of what they find in the area around them. For the purpose of the River of Words contest, we suggest that you help them find a place that has water in it: a river, a creek bed, a dry creek, a reservoir, lake, or pond. It should be a place they can visit physically and safely. More sophisticated student artists may wish to create visual art of the map assignment or additional drawings, paintings or photographs that could be submitted to River of Words at riverofwords.org by December 1, 2011.

Resources

Introduce John Wesley Powell, present his journal entries from his book, *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries*, and discuss with your students why an explorer might keep a journal during his explorations and what he might record in that journal. Visit the John Wesley Powell link below for reference

The John Wesley Powell Memorial Museum website powellmuseum.org/MajorPowell, contains an illustrated narrative of Powell's life and expedition down the Colorado River.

Recommendations for the Student Journal Assignment

First ask your students to list the kinds of things written about in the Powell journal sample, such as animals, plants, and geography. Help them identify what stands out about the writing (details, specific concrete language and images, the names of things). Create a word bank from the Powell journal entries. Now assign your students their journal entries. Ask your students to explore an outdoor place near water that is special to them, such as a creek, river, pond, or lake. Recommend that younger students explore the area with an adult. Students should record not only what they see, hear, smell, and touch during their exploration, but also their feelings and thoughts about the place. Suggest to your students that they draw a map of their area or sketch a picture. Brainstorm with your class on what types of things they will most likely observe in their own ecospheres, such as kingfishers, elk, granite rocks, cottonwoods, etc., and add those words to the Powell word bank. You might suggest that they collect objects during their walk and bring those to class to share. Encourage them to use plant and bird field guides to help them learn the names of things. If they don't have field guides, suggest they photograph or sketch pictures of the plants and birds they see, and then use resources in the classroom or library to identify these.

Suggest that students describe:

What they see, smell, touch, and hear in this place

Physical characteristics of the area: water sources, rock outcroppings, sand, meadows, etc.

Water characteristics of the area: are there any bodies of water? Streams? Wells? What are the names of the bodies of water?

Weather characteristics: rain, storms, snow, or drought? How might they tell from the appearance of the land?

Flower and plant population: what flowers and plants inhabit the area? What do they look like? Smell like? Feel like? What are their names?

Bird population: what birds do they see? What do they look like?

What are their names? What birds are known to inhabit the area? What types of nests do they see?

Invite your students to share their journals and maps with each other. We suggest giving them the journal assignment over a weekend so that they will have time to explore their spot.



Science Extension Activity

An Eye For Detail

As students record their observations in writing, they can also continue to practice their observational skills through visually recreating what they witness. As they draw what they see and capture it through their own artistic creations, their attention to detail will increase.

Provide students with watercolors, crayons, markers, pencils, or other materials, and encourage them to observe some part of their nature spot in close detail. Ask students to capture the size, color, shape and other characteristics of the wetland grasses, riverbank, lake or fish that they are trying to depict. Ask students to volunteer to share and explain their creations with the class.

Discussion questions

Was it easier to describe the object in writing or to do it visually (by drawing)?

Why would it be important for scientists to be very detailed in their observations? (Have the students think back to your discussion about Powell's journals. Why was he so detailed?)

Did they observe new or added detail through the process of drawing that could be written into their poems?

Encourage students to submit their drawings, illustrations, and/ or artwork to the 2011 River of Words competition riverofwords.org/contest_rules by the 12.1.11 deadline.

The List Poem

The list poem is just that: a list. It itemizes things, events, and thoughts. It is an easy form of poetry to teach, with one caveat. The list should be resonant and compelling, driving the reader through the poem. Resonance comes from richly detailed language that originates from all five senses: what students see, hear, feel, smell, and taste. Compelling movement within the list comes from the repetition of grammatical structures and a progression from general to specific, or vice versa, or from abstract to personal. Overall, there should be a purpose to the list. Look at this stanza from the Whitman excerpt of "There Was A Child Went Forth":

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass, and white and red morning-glories,
and white and red clover, and the song of
the phoebe-bird,
And the third-month lambs, and the sow's pink-faint
litter, and the mare's foal, and the cow's calf,
And the noisy brood of the barn-yard, or by the mire
of the pond-side,
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously
below there—and the beautiful curious liquid,
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads—
all became part of him.

The list of objects in this stanza are connected together by the word "and." What makes the list interesting, besides the strikingly detailed, concrete language, is the changing grammatical form of the list—from single nouns with compound adjectives to possessive nouns that follow "song of," to nouns with prepositional phrases that begin with "of," to verbs with "ing" endings. The list of things named changes too: from floral, to barnyard, to pond-side, to field and tree, to road, and finally to people in the next stanza: "And the old drunkard staggering home from the out-house of the tavern, whence he had lately risen." The changing grammatical structure within the lines of the poem creates organic rhythm; each line and each grouping of lines propels the reader forward because of the language and because of the changes in sentence and grammatical patterns. Also note the general conceit of the poem: the poem isn't merely about recording nature as the poet sees it. It is about how the observer becomes what he or she observes—in a sense, Whitman is talking about his early "training" as a poet. He is trying to express how the soul of a poet is formed through his or her observations and experiences of the world. This transformation of the world and theme, along with poetic devices such as line breaks, rhythm, alliteration, and imagery, make Whitman's work a poem. In contrast, Powell's journal entries, while poetic, simply record the direct experience and his feelings around that experience.

Recommendations for Generating Discussion with Your Students

Distribute copies of the Whitman excerpt from "There Was A Child Went Forth." Ask someone in the class to read the excerpt aloud. Ask your students to compare their excerpt to the Powell journal entries and discuss these questions:

What are the similarities and differences between "There Was a Child Went Forth" and the Powell journal entries?

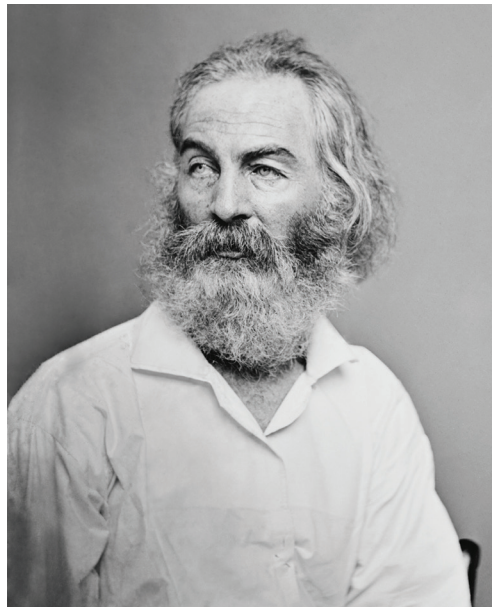
What is the purpose of each author?

What makes Whitman's poem a poem and not a journal entry?

Writing the List Poem

Encourage your students to use their journal entries to write a list poem about what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and felt in their nature spot. Have them try organizing the poem into "sense" categories, each category including a list of 4 or 5 specific concrete references. The list should include repetition of phrases, sentence structure, and sound. Suggest students end the poem with a list of what they know, feel, wish, and/or dream of.

To help your students understand the list poem, you might use the exercise listed at gigglepoetry.com.





Lesson One Poem Sample

Below you'll find an example of a list poem from the 2003 River of Words anthology. While the poem is not an exact fit to this assignment, it is a lovely example of the list poem and the use of evocative specific concrete details. As your students write their list poems, please submit the best to the River of Words competition at riverofwords.org

Home

I am from the Estrellas, Celestines and Nolyas back
home from the dusty, crop-lined gravel roads of Mallet—
stalks of cane flittering in the wind

And from fresh pineapple ice cream
churned to perfection by the tired hand of my mother.
I am from sweltering evenings
spent basking among the cool shadows of fig trees,
and from persimmons and maypops and blackberry stained hands
sore from years of jacks and tic tac toe.

I am from acres of land littered with chickens, cows, hogs, and cats—
a yardful of life.

And from adventures to the bayou—
returning home with a glittering jar of minnow
filled to the brim with the sludgy "Loo-Zee-Anna" water
I am from a plethora of Tupperware
cushioning my soggy cornbread crumbling in a pool of milk
And from rice and gravy cooked in my mother's stuffy kitchen—
washed down with a tall glass of Kool-Aid.

My life is a rich history filled with stories left untold,
one that continues to grow with each passing moment
one that my children will explore—
when the time is right
and the cycle continues
through the lives of my grandchildren

Danielle Duroseau, Age 16,
LSU University Lab School Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Teacher: Connie McDonald.
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Science Extension Activity

Your Sense of Place— Definition and Answer

If you have online access in the classroom, consider consulting any number of online field guides. Certain sites provide descriptions and photos of more than 5,500 species. If this isn't available to you, use field guides from your school or local library to help the students identify more specifically what they see, thereby making their poems rich in detail and relevant to their place. Once students have made their own visits to a specific place and recorded their observations, divide students into groups, assigning each a different aspect of the ecosystem to consider (e.g. birds, plants, rocks, soils, smells, sounds). Have them make a list of ten observations to present to the class. Ask students to incorporate at least two terms from each list into their poems.

General Terminology

Knowledge of general ecology terms may also be useful to your students. Possible terms and definitions include:

bioregion - The world's major communities, classified according to the predominant vegetation and characterized by adaptations of organisms to that particular environment. These include deserts, forests, grasslands, tundra, and aquatic regions.

carnivore - An organism that eats meat. Most carnivores are animals, but a few fungi and plants are as well.

ecosystem - All the organisms in a particular region and the environment in which they live. The elements of an ecosystem interact with each other in some way, and thus depend on each other either directly or indirectly.

environment - The place in which an organism lives, and the circumstances under which it lives. Environment includes measures like moisture and temperature, as much as it refers to the actual physical place where an organism is found.

erosion - The process in which material is worn away by a stream of liquid (water) or air, often due to the presence of abrasive particles in the stream.

flood plain - A strip of relatively flat and normally dry land alongside a stream, river, or lake that is covered by water during a flood.

habitat - The place and conditions in which an organism lives.

headwater(s) - (1) The source and upper reaches of a stream; also the upper reaches of a reservoir. (2) The water upstream from a structure or point on a stream. (3) The small streams that come together to form a river. Also may be thought of as any and all parts of a river basin except the mainstream river and main tributaries.

herbivore - Literally, an organism, usually an animal, that eats plants.

marsh - A treeless wetland dominated by grasses.

omnivore - An organism that will eat anything.

playa - A dry lake bed or lowland area that is periodically flooded.

prairie - A wide, relatively flat area of land with grasses and only a few trees.

raptor - Birds adapted for living on prey. They typically have a strong decurved bill and sharp piercing talons used to capture prey.

riparian - Land areas adjacent to water identified by the presence of vegetation, requiring large amounts of water normally available from a high water table.

tributary - A smaller river or stream that flows into a larger river or stream. Usually, a number of smaller tributaries merge to form a river.

water cycle - The circuit of water movement from oceans to atmosphere to Earth and returning to the atmosphere through various stages or processes such as precipitation, interception, runoff, infiltration, percolation, storage, evaporation, and transportation.

watershed - The land area that drains water to a particular stream, river, or lake that can be identified by tracing a line along the highest elevations between two areas on a map (often a ridge). Large watersheds, like the Mississippi River basin contain thousands of smaller watersheds. Everyone lives in a watershed, even if not near a lake or river.



For the Young

The list poem is the easiest poem for children of all ages to write. Basically, it relies on the poet's power of observation. While Powell's journal and Whitman's poem add important background material that will make for stronger poems, this material can be overwhelming for younger students. You are the best gauge of what your young students can handle, but here are some suggestions:

Read either the Powell or the Whitman piece, or both, to your students. Ask them what kinds of things are described in the piece. Write them down on the board. Point out the details used to describe these things.

Ask your students who has been to a creek, a pond, or a river. Did they see any of the things described by Powell or Whitman? What else did they see there? What kinds of birds, animals, plants, rocks? What color were they? What color was the water? Did they hear anything there? What did the birds sound like? The water? Lead your students through the five senses and write their observations down on the board.

Now ask your students to write a poem about what they see, hear, feel, etc. at a river or creek. You might help them organize their observations by suggesting they order their list by the senses, or by what's smaller to larger or vice-versa.



Let The River Speak—Writing the Persona Poem

The Negro Speaks Of Rivers

I've known rivers
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older
than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes

From the earliest times, the river has been us and we have been the river. We have fished from its banks, swum in its cold currents of mountain snow, diverted its flows and eddies to spark a sprig of corn and give families their drinking water. We have also saddled it with bridges, dammed it, and harnessed it with power plants.

The history of the river is a human history, and we can give the river a human voice to tell its story. In this lesson your students will explore the human history of the river and then write a persona poem about that history in the voice of the river. Defining river use in broad categories such as farming, transportation, direct food and water source, and/or recreation, students begin their exploration by creating a pictorial collage made of photo and illustration cut-outs depicting the ways humans use rivers. Students will share their posters and discuss the interactions of humans and rivers. As a culminating exercise, students will write their poems and let the river speak.

You might want to share this recording of Langston Hughes discussing and reciting his poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" at salon.com

A History of Rivers

Part of our goal in these lesson plans is to give your students the background information and inspiration that will serve as catalysts for their poems. In Lesson One, we asked your students to do some personal observation and to write down their observations in a journal. They looked at Powell's journal and Whitman's poem for inspiration.

Writing in their journals helps students prime the pump for their poems, so to speak. We can help them prime the pump in other ways too. In this lesson, they will learn a bit about the history of the river and then go on a scavenger hunt for photos and pictures that they can turn into a "human history" collage of the river. The visual arts and poetry have been long time companions—the painter/photographer inspires the

poet and the poet inspires the painter/photographer. Outstanding student creators of collages should be encouraged to submit their work to River of Words at riverofwords.org

Creating the Collage

Introduce your students to "A Short History of Rivers" (internationalrivers.org/en/node/568) by Patrick McCully, author and staff member of International Rivers Network, an organization dedicated to saving rivers and their watersheds. Then ask students to form small groups, brainstorm ways humans use rivers, and collectively decide on several categories for the human history of rivers. Groups will then choose a category (or all categories), search for photos and pictures (via books, magazines, and the internet) to create a human history of rivers collage, and then present their posters to the class. This will serve as the visual inspiration for their poems.

Resources

"A Short History of Rivers,"

by Patrick McCully discusses the birth of rivers, their physical characteristics, how they relate to the land around them, and their role in human history. The essay is actually an excerpt from McCully's book, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*, 1996. (We suggest you print out the essay and hand it out to your students.)

River of Words

riverofwords.org includes "A Short History of Rivers" in its K12 Watershed Explore Curriculum.

Headwaters Magazine

cfwe.org/headwaters/headwaters

Produced by the Colorado Foundation for Water Education, Headwaters magazine offers numerous articles of interest regarding water use in Colorado. Issues of the magazine download as PDF files.

Denver Water

denverwater.org

The Denver Water Department website contains a wealth of information regarding Colorado and water.

Southeastern Water Conservancy District

secwcd.org

Rio Grande Water Conservation District

mrgcd.com

Southwestern Water Conservation District

waterinfo.org/history

Colorado River Water Conservation District

yampavalley.info

Colorado River, Colorado Basin and Glenwood Canyon Dam

desertusa.com/colorado
A monthly magazine

Colorado-Big Thompson Project

ncwcd.org
Considered to be one of the finest examples of a major reclamation project.

The Persona Poem

Often a poet will take on the voice and life of an object or thing, a literary device known as “personification.” A poem written entirely in the voice of that object or thing is called a “persona poem” or “mask” poem. The “I” of the poem is not the poet, but rather the object or thing. Persona poems are written from the point of view of the object or thing, not from the poet’s. A persona poem can also be written from the perspective of another person, often called a “dramatic monologue.” The main point of the persona poem is for the poet not to write from his or her own perspective. Often poets will try to create a persona “character,” a distinct being with its own vocabulary and tone.

Writing a persona poem allows the poet unexpected freedom. Word choice and the way of putting words together in a line of poetry change to reflect the personality and history of the persona. Persona poems work best when the poet draws from personal observation, scientific fact and history to help create the voice and vision of the persona. Persona poems reveal what the object feels and thinks, what it remembers, hopes, and dreams. The poem should reflect a need for the object to tell its audience something.

In this case, your students will be writing in the voice of the river. The river needs to tell a contemporary person something: a secret, a wish, a warning, a fear, or a hope. Perhaps it needs to tell the story of how it came to be what it is now. Your students can make that decision by drawing on what they learned from “A Short History of Rivers” and from creating their poster collages.

I puddle up the neighborhood
I make the mailman mad
I wake the worm and spank the frog . . .

Excerpt from “Spring Rain” by J. Patrick Lewis

Assignment Instructions for Persona Poem

What might the river sound like? What does it feel like to be the river? What secrets does the river know that we do not know? What might the river want to tell us? These questions are the sparks for poems written in the voice of the river. Would the river speak in long lines? Short

lines? What sounds might the river make when it speaks? You may even ask the class to make river sounds. Share the sample river persona poems on pages 16 and 17 with your students. Ask students to use the information they gathered for their poster collages about the river to write their own river persona poems.

Suggest the following poem rules

1. The title of the poem must indicate that a river is speaking.
2. The river must speak for itself, using “I.”
3. The river must speak to us using “you.”
4. The river must have something it wants to tell us: a secret, a warning, a wish...
5. The poem should be at least 10 lines long

Poem Samples

On the next page you will find two examples of a river persona poem from the 2002 and 2004 Colorado River of Words Poetry contest. As your students write their persona poems, please consider submitting their work to the 2011 River of Words competition at riverofwords.org by the 12.1.11 deadline.

I Am the Headwaters

I am the headwaters plunging,
and racing down rocky walls,
I am the river foaming, rushing over rocks worn
smooth at my touch,
I am home to the river otter, swimming playfully
or snoozing on my banks,
I am the carver of the canyons,
I am the home of the fish, small and sleek
or big and fat,
I am the playground of the ducks,
I know where I am going and I will get there,
I flow slowly,
I rush swiftly,
I am the commander of the floods,
I guide the trickling streams,
I am as clear as the wind in the mountains,
I never stop my journey to the salty sea, where I
tickle the brightly colored fishes,
I am the greatest traveler in the world, if you don't
believe me try and beat me, for I am the river.

Katie Post, Grade 6, Logan School
Denver Teacher: Jamie Newton
2002 River of Words Poetry Contest
Colorado Winner, 1st Prize

River Of Song

I was untamed.
The only ear
That could hear
My pulsing cry
Were primitive animals
Who came to me
For a drink
Of my nectar.
I lived in a cycle
Of rain and snow bloating me.
Sun and earth shrinking me,
I was happy.
I was whole.
My tributaries
Would come to me.
Telling me stories
Of their travels.
I forged on.
Made stories of my own.
But time caught up to me.
The sleek salmon,
My brethren
My children
Were caught with a net or hook.
Reeled in.
I forged on
Tried to ignore
The pain that enveloped me.
I was silent, ignored.
Taken for granted.
I was tamed.

Hannah O'Neill, Grade 6, Logan School
Denver Teacher: Jamie Newton
2004 River of Words Poetry Contest
Colorado Honorable Mention



Science Extension Activity

Water Use

Students will make collages based on research they have done on water use in each of Colorado's eight major river basins. However, it has more specific reference to Colorado's rivers and water uses than this lesson's pre-assignment that will help students understand how water is used in their home state. The eight major river basins in Colorado are:

1. Green River Basin
2. North Platte River Basin
3. South Platte River Basin
4. Republican River Basin
5. Arkansas River Basin
6. Rio Grande River Basin
7. San Juan River and Dolores River Basins
8. Colorado and Gunnison River Basins

See links on the next page for maps and resources. Divide the class into eight different groups, each representing one of Colorado's major river basins. Have each group create a collage representing the major water uses and landscapes from that basin. Remind students to think of different types of water users: humans, plants, and animals.

For example, if a group is focusing on the Yampa River, possible pictures would represent recreation (skiing, hiking, kayaking), agriculture (ranching and farming), and industry (coal, gas, and oil mining) uses. Once the collages are completed, have the groups present their findings to the class by identifying the various uses that are unique to the basin in question.

Follow-up questions may include

What are the similarities in water uses between basins? Differences?

How are the rivers themselves similar or different from others throughout the state? (Length, volume, etc.)

What conclusions can they come to about the state's water uses?

What have been the positive human effects on rivers?
Negative effects?

Resources

Colorado Foundation for Water Education's Citizen's Guide: Where Does Your Water Come From?

cfwe.org Helps students recognize the watershed in which they live and where the water they drink comes from. The above guide also discusses delivery systems that bring water from the Western Slope to the Front Range.

Colorado Water Conservation Board

cwcw.state.co.us

The Colorado Water Conservation Board works to conserve, develop, protect, and manage Colorado's water for present and future generations.

Their website provides information on water education resources, including a video presentation (kiosk) and an educational resource guide.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

epa.gov/ebtpages/water

Follow the "Surf Your Watershed" link from this page to get up-to-date information about your specific watershed.

U.S. Geological Survey

usgs.gov/state/state.asp?State=CO

This site provides real-time information about stream flow conditions, flooding, groundwater, and drought. You can manipulate data to produce various graphs and charts to represent the characteristics of the state's streams and rivers.



For the Young

The persona poem can be a fun way to get younger students thinking imaginatively about the world around them. Depending on the age, you might want to encourage your students to draw pictures of fun things that people do on a river. You can use McCully's "A Short History of Rivers" essay to help them understand how rivers begin and end and the importance they play in our lives.

Resources

Old Elm Speaks Teacher Guide by Kristen O'Connell George

kristinegeorge.com/teachers_guide_old_elm_speaks

Especially for teachers with younger students, this might be an ideal site to begin an exploration into the persona or mask poem.

It offers a short explanation of what a mask poem is, ideas to get the younger student going through exercises in writing tree poems, and a lovely short and sweet sample persona poem: "Old Elm Speaks." When visiting the page you will have to scroll down to find the poem.



3 Native American Myths & the Prose Poem

Who are we? Where do we come from? And the rivers? And the blue rain? And those stars shining just beyond me? Are they just questions of a child? Or questions of all eternity? Our human history is rich with



the myths and stories created to answer just these questions and nowhere is it richer than in Native American myth. In this lesson, students will read examples of myths that focus on the origins of things, or focus on natural elements in the world, such as Why The North Star Stands Still, and they will be invited to write their own myths about the birth of the river or rain. To begin their myths, your students will be asked to identify and describe general characteristics of the Native American myth that they find in the examples they read, and to

discuss the significance of myth in Native American culture. Choosing one myth, students will then analyze the myth in their journals, creating a list of what they think should be included in their myth. You will then share with them the characteristics of a prose poem and offer them an example.

Before starting their own myth, students will explore the scientific explanation of where rivers and rain came from. Students will then write their own myths about the river or rain as prose poems.

The Minnesota Public Radio website's news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/199702/01_smiths_densmore/docs/index offers a section on Frances Densmore, a young music teacher in the early 20th century who took it upon herself to record on her little cylinder recorder the songs of the Indians she met. There you will find links to audio recordings of Indian song. Also, if you click on the Magic Lantern link you can hear and see a presentation on Native American song and dance created from the original pictures and recordings of Frances Densmore. If you have an advanced classroom, this might be an interesting way to get your students in the mood for myth-making.



Exploring the Native American Myth

Once again, you will use journal writing and classroom discussion as a way to prepare your students for writing their river or rain myth as prose poems. Your students will begin by reading one or more myths that focus on the beginnings of something: the creation of the North Star, how animals and birds were created, or the origins of light. In their journals, your students will write down their reactions to the myths and a description of what they see as general characteristics of these myths by answering some "Questions to Consider." You can then open the floor for discussion and explore what the meaning and function of myths were for Native Americans. Let your students share their journal entries with each other and perhaps create a list of common characteristics of Native American myths that they can use when they create their own myths about the birth of the river or the rain.

Writing the Journal

Give your students a chance to read one or more Native American myths. If you choose to use one of your own myths, be sure to use one that describes the birth or origin of something so that your students will be able to use it as a model for their own myths.

Resources

Why the North Star Stands Still

ilhawaii.net/%7Estony/lore104

Pauite North American story of the North Star's creation.

When the Animals and Birds Were Created

ilhawaii.net/%7Estony/lore43

Native American example that recounts the creation of beings on earth by the two brothers of the sun and the moon.

The Origin of Light

ilhawaii.net/%7Estony/lore12 Myth from the Inuit that tells a very short but interesting tale about the origin of light.

Secondary resource example

Evers, Larry (1983). Continuity and Change in American Indian Oral Literature

www.mla.org/adeft_bulletin_cade_75_43&from=adeft_bulletin_t_ade75_0

This fascinating essay on the American Indian Oral tradition deserves to be read in its entirety, but it contains an especially relevant passage on "true" and "fictional" narratives starting with paragraph 11.

Writing the Myth as Prose Poem



Illustration for the Poem
"Le Tombeau de Charles
Baudelaire"
Henri Matisse 1932.
The French poet, Charles
Baudelaire, is considered the
founder of the prose
poem form.

The prose poem is a perfect match in form for the myth. Myths use devices such as repetition and enumeration. Though the prose poem is not written in the traditional form of poetry with line and stanza breaks, many other devices of poetry appear in it: sound patterns like alliteration, repetition of consonant sounds and assonance, repetition of vowel sounds, rhythmic patterns (through the repetition of word, phrase, and sentence patterns), and figurative language (such as simile and metaphor). Myths are filled with vivid images—the listener begins to inhabit the world created by the storyteller. Prose poems are based on vivid imagery of the senses that reveals rather than tells meaning. Myths are steeped in the magical and sacred; prose poems often move to the surreal, to what might make emotional sense rather than logical sense.

The prose poem helps students recognize that there is more to poetry than line breaks and a rhyming pattern at the end of lines. Working with a myth allows students to move toward the magic of surrealism without necessarily realizing they are doing this. The poems may begin by being couched very definitely in what is real and concrete, but can slowly drift or dramatically soar into surreal or sacred images that make no logical sense but do make emotional sense.

Since your students' prose poem myths will be on the birth of the river or rain, you may want to provide them with "A Short History of Rivers" by Patrick McCully (internationalrivers.org/index.php?id=basics/damhistory) at the International Rivers Network for some scientific information on how rivers are formed.

Creating the Prose Poem

To help you understand what the prose poem is, and the controversies surrounding the prose poem versus straight prose, please visit the following links. You may or may not choose to use some of the prose poems in these sites as examples for your students:

The Academy of American Poets for a quick introduction to The Prose Poem at poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5787

An example of a prose poem by the contemporary American poet, Robert Bly, entitled: "Warning to the Reader" at webdelsol.com/tpp/tpp5/tpp5_bly

The Myth Prose Poem Assignment

Share with your students the following guidelines for the Myth Prose Poem

1. As in the tuuwutsi storytelling Hopi Indian tradition, begin the myth with "Alikasai . . .," and close with "Pai yuk polo" (Now to here it ends).
2. Begin the poem myth in the world before there was a river or rain.
3. Create a need for the river or rain.
4. Inhabit your world with magical creatures who can speak and hear.
5. Use sense imagery of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste to make the world come alive.
6. Use repetition: words, phrases, sounds, cadence.
7. Write the myth poem from margin to margin across the page without making any line or stanza breaks.

Poem Sample

Below you will find one example of a myth prose poem. As your students write their myth prose poems, please consider submitting their work to the 2011 River of Words competition (riverofwords.org) by the deadline 12.1.11.



How Frog Brought Rain

In the beginning there was only fire, and then, at first only, in the beginning, after land rose from the sea, a frog with a big voice and small dry body. He complained and complained about missing something, he didn't know what, his throaty moaning and whining annoying everyone around him so much that some trees grew up to try to muffle the sound of his unhappiness. Their roots grew deep under the land where the secret rivers flow and they pulled up the water to the sky where it lifted from the leaves to form tiny drops that finally fell on the frog's head, startling him into silence. And it was no longer the beginning anymore.

Anonymous



Science Extension Activity

The Water Cycle

Native American traditions and history often use myths and storytelling to explain natural phenomena (rain, earthquakes, drought). Modern science uses the water cycle to explain how precipitation falls from the sky, filling rivers and streams that then flow to the oceans. The following activities from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency build on the information given in Patrick McCully's essay and teach your students about how water travels through the water cycle and across the earth. Each of the following activities includes all information necessary for you to facilitate the exercise including materials, background information, time requirements, and discussion questions.

Science Resources

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

epa.gov/safewater/kids/wsb/index

Divided by grade levels, this page lists the EPA's water activities for K-12 students that are found in the Water Sourcebook.

It includes the activities listed in the science extension along with scores of other hands-on water education lessons.

Missouri Botanical Garden

mbgnet.mobot.org/fresh/

Provides easy-to-understand explanations of the water cycle along with descriptions of the earth's biomes and various ecosystems.

Montana State University's Native Waters Program

nativewaters.org/

This outreach program is dedicated to increasing awareness and respect for tribal water resources. As a community education initiative it supports the efforts of tribal leaders, educators, and students to develop contemporary, scientifically accurate and culturally sensitive water education resources, programs and networking opportunities. It also includes helpful links to tribal websites, colleges, and the "Native Waters: Sharing the Source" exhibit.



For the Young

The myth prose poem lesson is probably the easiest one to modify for the young. The myths included in this lesson are for all ages. The focus of the prose poem should be on descriptive images and imaginative tales of how the rain or the river was born. You might talk science first, using information from "A Short History of Rivers" by Patrick McCully at the International Rivers Network, and then encourage your kids to be imaginative and wild in creating their own myths.

Resources

Myths, Folktales & Fairytales

teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mff/index

Especially for teachers with young students, this website provides myth-making lessons created by noted children's authors such as Jane Yolen. It also provides a very cool "myth-brainstorming" machine for the wired classroom.

4

The Web of Life and a Taste of Form

Watching the moon at midnight,
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely,
no part left out.

Izumi Shikibu, (974-1034?)

What connects us to the birds, the trees, the rivers?
How do we find the spiritual in the world around us, no matter how we define "spirituality"? What makes words luminous so that when the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver, ends her poem, "Egrets" with the words: "they opened their wings/softly and stepped/over every dark thing" we know she is no longer describing just what she sees, but what she feels and that she too, like us now, is stepping over the dark things of this world?

And how can words of an ancient Japanese poet reach out to us across the centuries and become our voice too? Poetry is more than description. Poetry is finding the connection of all things in the here and now. In this lesson, your students will have an opportunity to revisit their "spots" in Lesson One, and this time begin to connect the dots between the natural world, the human world and its culture, and their inner world of fleeting emotion and epiphany. We will use the wonderful exercise, "The Web of Life," created by Sandford Lyne, poet and educator, for the River of Words K-12 Educator's Guide (See pages 16-21).

"Life is the Teacher: Writing Poems from Daily Experience" by Sandford Lyne (in the River of Words K-12 Curriculum, pp 132-138) presents a specific way of looking at and writing poetry and offers a detailed plan for guiding your students into the "Web of Life" poem.



Life is the Teacher: Writing Poems from Daily Experience **by Sanford Lyne**

Sanford Lyne is an award-winning Louisiana poet and poetry teacher. Through his acclaimed "Inner Writer" program and the education programs of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Lyne has taught poetry writing to over 40,000 young people and several thousand teachers nationwide. He is the author of several books, including two collections of poems by young people, "Ten-Second Rainshowers," and "Soft Hay Will Catch You."

Poems as the "Fingerprint of the Soul"

I like to start my poetry writing work with students by reminding them that each of us lives in two worlds—the outer world of the senses (what we can see, touch, taste, smell, hear) and the inner world of thought, emotion, imagination, and memory. One of the purposes of poetry writing is to go into these two worlds—we could say we are going in two directions, inward and outward—and find the places where the two overlap. I also like to tell students that a poem is "the fingerprint of the soul," and just as no two people have the same physical fingerprints, no two people put poems together in the same way. Our poems—the fingerprints of our souls—will also be different. In other words, be yourself on paper when you write.

The Web of Daily Relationships

Everyone on earth lives within a web of daily relationships and experiences. Poets, in their developed awareness, use this web automatically in their poetry. The Web of Life diagram [page 138] provides a quick, simplified overview of this web. I ask student's to think of this web as if it were a spider's web; each part may be connected to any other part, and each part may affect any other part or the whole. This interrelatedness and connectedness reflects, of course, the whole of nature and the operating principles of ecosystems, as well.

Before use the web for writing poems, begin by discussing each part of the web and how it affects each of us. What is our relationship with each part of the web? How are we affected physically, emotionally, and in our thinking and imaginations by each part of the web? Many students now grow up in a techno-materialistic consumer environment with a greatly diminished awareness of this web of daily relationships. This discussion helps them to establish their connections to the web. For example, I ask students to think about "place." We are always "somewhere," and we either like the place we are in or not. Places have "energy." Places feel quiet, or peaceful—like a pond, or a library, or a church sanctuary. Or places may feel "sad," or menacing, or disturbing—like a street corner where drugs are sold, or an abandoned building. Some places—like and artist's studio, or a field of wildflowers—may invite the natural flow of our creative juices. I ask students

to give examples of places where they could feel the "energy" of the place and to name the feeling they had in that place.

Using the Example of Chinese Poets

The next step is to try out the web in putting together a poem. I tell students that the poets who were great masters at using the web were the Chinese poets. As a short-hand, I sometimes tell students that we are going to be "Chinese poets," that is, to learn to master the use of the web in our writing. I tell students that two principles were key to the Chinese poets: 1. Be very present, in the here-and-now, and 2. Be honest. Since no two days are alike, if you write about today (the here-and-now) and tell the truth, each day you will have a new poem.

The "Practice Poem"

I tell students that we are going to begin by writing a "practice poem," constructing the poem line by line by using the web. In the practice poem, I tell them, you may make things up, but the poem should seem to be here-and-now, and truthful. It should have the "ring of truth." I tell students that in Chinese poems, two parts of the web are almost always used—Self and Place. The Chinese poet puts himself in the poem as the observer and tells you where he is. In leading this exercise, teachers may come up with their own practice for a model or use mine. I start my poem by writing on the board the following sentence:

I am walking down a dusty road.

I ask the students if Place and Self are in that sentence, and, of course, they are. I then ask the students to write the first line or sentence of their poem, placing themselves in some outdoor place (outdoors we can more easily incorporate more of the web). I remind them to tell the reader what they are doing in that place. I tell students the sentence should sound real and truthful for someone of their age and experience, and I ask them to keep in mind an actual place they know about (as a source for details). After the students have had an opportunity to write the line, I have several read their line aloud. We check to see if each line sounds truthful, as both Self and Place, and tells what the speaker is doing. Sometimes, some other aspect of the web may have also appeared in the line, and that is perfectly fine. I then tell students that we are going to add a second sentence, this time putting in something about the Weather. My own example now reads:

*I am walking down a dusty road.
The hot, dry wind blows about my face.*

The students then add their own second line, and again I have several of them read their poems aloud. I have the students read *all* they have written each time, so we can see if the parts are also fitting together. In the next line, I tell students to add something from the web (their choice) that they haven't put in yet. My example—adding something from the animal kingdom and something else from the plant kingdom—now reads:

*I am walking down a dusty road.
The hot, dry wind blows about my face.
The neighbor's horses take shelter under the cool pines.*

The students then add their third line, and again we read a few examples aloud, checking to see what aspects of the web have been introduced and to make sure all the lines fit together. I then ask students to complete their poems, adding more details from the web, and also any feelings, associations, memories, and reflections that seem to fit. I tell them that they may also change, delete, or rearrange anything in the poem. And I also want them to give a title to the poem. My own finished poem on the board now reads:

SMART HORSES ON A HOT DAY

*I am walking down a dusty road.
The hot, dry wind blows about my face.
The neighbor's horses take shelter under the cool pines.
Pine needles make a soft bed for them to stand on.
I think I'll join them.*

It is important when writing poems in the classroom to remember the rich diversity in the students, and to remember that no two students will put poems together in the same way. Some are more naturally extraverted and some more introverted. In their poems, some move more easily into the outward world, and some more easily into the inward. Some more easily see the overlap of the two worlds. The outer world is actually a mirror of our inner world. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: *The universe is the externalization of the soul.* Some students grasp this reflection more readily than others.

More Practice Poems Using "Prompts"

The next practice poem is designed to help students see this "mirroring" aspect to our inner and outer worlds. For the first line of the poem have all the students write:

I am sad today.

In the next line, have students put in something about the sky. Remind students that they are constructing a poem, line by line, and the lines must somehow fit together. Again, when done, have a few students read aloud what they've written. In the third line, have students put in something about a tree or trees (or parts of trees—leaves, trunks, branches). Then add a line putting in something about a bird or birds (better if it's a specific bird—crows, sparrows, doves). I then ask them to keep adding lines, using anything from the web, until the poem feels complete. I tell them again that they may change, delete, or rearrange anything in the poem. I also like students to title their poems when they are done. A title is a way of identifying to yourself what your poem is about, and it's an important developmental step, I think, for students to take in their writing.

In the above exercises, the idea is for students to build a "web of daily relationships" (things observed) around a central thought or feeling, allowing the details to enrich what is being experienced and expressed. In this way, students are also building connections with the world around them. In classrooms where I've introduced this exercise, teachers have been awestruck by the depth, poignancy, and ingenuity of students in writing these poems. Sometimes I substitute for the opening line, *No one knows I'm here*, or with high school students, *Love found me today*. Sometimes students want to substitute the feeling in the opening line, changing "sad" to "happy," or "angry" or "at peace" or some other feeling. Said another way, the purpose of the practice exercises is twofold: 1. To help the extraverted or concrete-thinking student to see inner correspondences in feeling, and 2. To help the introverted and intuitive student to develop connections with the outer or physical world.

Helping Students Write Their "River of Words" Poems

The above introduction to the Web of Daily Relationships, the discussion, and writing exercises take about one class period (50-55 minutes). The next step is to turn the use of the web toward writing poems about watersheds and the natural world. In writing this poem, each student should first choose a "place" to write about. This should be a place that the student knows about in as much richness of detail as possible. This might be a river, lake, pond, park, backyard, creek, or marsh that the class has visited together on a field trip, or it might be a place the student has frequented alone or with family or friends. Ideally, from first-hand experience or from field guides or local experts, the student should have some real knowledge of the land and flora and fauna (vocabulary names) of the place he or she is writing about. This writing exercise also takes one class period.

In the center of the page have each student write down the place they are writing about, putting that place in a circle. Then guide the students through a brainstorming exercise about the place, utilizing each aspect of the web. In doing this exercise, I model for the students by creating my own brainstorming page, bringing to it my knowledge base, sensory memories, and associations. Here are some suggested questions, using the web:

- ◆ Self: What thoughts and feelings come to mind when you think of this place? What parts of your body come to mind? What personal associations and memories?
- ◆ Others: What people come to mind, and why?
- ◆ Seasonal Details: What seasons and signs of seasons come to mind?
- ◆ Weather: What weather comes to mind? What experiences with weather?
- ◆ Time of Day: What part of the day comes to mind? How did things look then? Any special sounds? Was there a mood or feeling you remember then?
- ◆ Animal Kingdom: What animals, birds, insects, etc. did you see, hear, notice? What were they doing? What feeling did they give you? What did they tell you about the health and condition of the place?
- ◆ Mineral Kingdom: What rock, stone, or crystal formations did you see? What did they add to your experience of the place?

- ◆ Man-made Things: What man-made objects come to mind when you think of this place—boats, docks, fishing and hiking gear, structures of any kind, personal items and so on?
- ◆ Celestial Things: What things in the sky or heavens did you notice? How did they add to your experience?
- ◆ Spiritual Things: Was this in any way a spiritual place for you (whatever that means to you)? What spiritual thoughts, feelings, associations, or experiences did you have?
- ◆ Elements: In what ways did you notice earth, air, fire, or water in any form? What did they add to the place? What thoughts or feelings do they bring to mind?

Modeling for Students is Important

In modeling for the students, I like to bring in personal material. For Self, I might write down that my feet liked walking on the boggy ground, or that I like the warmth of the sun on my face. For Spiritual Things, I might say something *like A beetle, green and Buddha-like, sits silent upon a warming stone*. The modeling can expand students' sense of what's possible. The modeling teacher grows along with the students.

Expect the Unexpected

Once the brainstorming writing is done, the students should then begin to assemble their poems. Very often as we begin to assemble images and descriptions, "ideas" also begin to emerge; meanings begin to appear; the unexpected happens, and we begin to write things we didn't know we were going to say. Emerson wrote: *Every writer is a skater, and must go partly where he would, and partly where the skates take him*. Again, the poet in each student is different. One student's poem may have more of an inward direction; another's may have more outer world detail and direction.

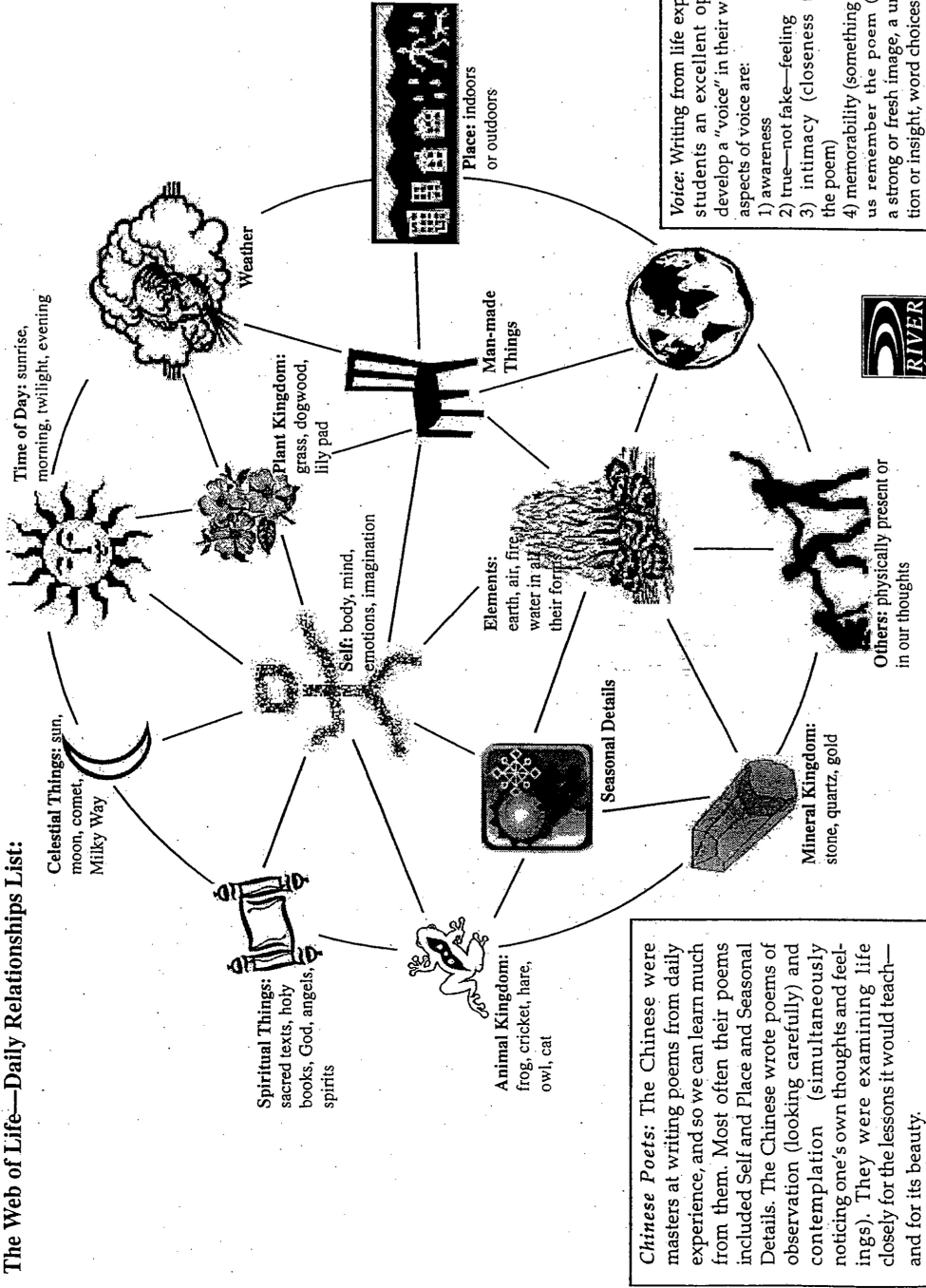
Utilize the River of Words Poetry Archive

I strongly suggest that teachers and students familiarize themselves with the student poems on the River of Words Web site (www.riverofwords.org). The best poems have a keen awareness of the Web of Life. I highly recommend Kevin Maher's poem, "Rockefeller Wildlife Preserve: Mid-August," (http://riverofwords.org/2000_poetry.html) ROW 2000 Grand Prize winner in Category III (Grade 7-9). On the surface it is a poem about fishing for crabs; at a deeper level the poet is immersing himself, moment by moment, in the scene around him. It's ending is worthy of the best Chinese and Japanese poets, who would find in this young poet an assured kindred sensibility. Aaron Wells' "Amazon Slough Watershed," (http://riverofwords.org/1999_poetry.html) 1999 Category II (Grade 3-6) Grand Prize winner, is another poem moving line by line out and into the Web of Life, heightening our awareness and appreciation. On the Web site, students will find some poems with an outer direction, others with a more inward direction. Most poems will have an overlap of inner and outer worlds.

Life is the Teacher: Writing Poems from Daily Experience

There are two keys in writing poems from our experiences: 1) be very present, in the here-and-now, and 2) be honest. The underlying belief is this: Life is the teacher, and to pay attention to your teacher, you must pay attention to your life. In paying attention to your "teacher," it is important to pay attention to these "daily relationships."

The Web of Life—Daily Relationships List:



Chinese Poets: The Chinese were masters at writing poems from daily experience, and so we can learn much from them. Most often their poems included Self and Place and Seasonal Details. The Chinese wrote poems of observation (looking carefully) and contemplation (simultaneously noticing one's own thoughts and feelings). They were examining life closely for the lessons it would teach—and for its beauty.

Voice: Writing from life experiences offers students an excellent opportunity to develop a "voice" in their writing. The four aspects of voice are:

- 1) awareness
- 2) true—not fake—feeling
- 3) intimacy (closeness to subject of the poem)
- 4) memorability (something that will make us remember the poem (for example: a strong or fresh image, a unique observation or insight, word choices and phrasing))





The Culture of Place

In Lesson One, your students chose a place near water to write about. They were asked to describe in their journals the physical characteristics of the area, the water characteristics, weather, flower and plant population, and bird population. For this poem, your students will begin by expanding upon their earlier observations of their water spots by exploring what they can of the culture and history of the place and the area around it, as well as their own family history and culture. They can ask family members for information, explore guide and tourist books, history books and encyclopedias to gather information about their place. Who might have visited this place before? Or lived there? What kind of dwellings exist on their spot now, or might have existed there a long time ago? Encourage them to find and use the proper names of things, such as the names of the people, foods, dwellings, and objects they discover as they record their findings in their journals.

Writing the Journal

You might want to refer back to Unit One and the example of the Powell journal entry if it's been a while since your students have worked on their journals. This journal exercise is a quick one, serving as a way to get your students to think about the human history of their water spot and the area surrounding it. It's also a chance to get your students thinking about their own family history and culture before they begin following the Stanford Lyne "Web of Life" Poetry exercise.

Questions for Journal entries

1. What is the human history of your place?
2. Who lived there before you?
Who lives there now?
Who else might have been there, past or present?
3. Are there any archeological sites? Dwellings?
Has any one found any man-made objects there, old or new?
4. What were the spiritual beliefs of those who lived near this area?

5. Do any spiritual places exist in the area?
What is your family's spiritual history?
6. Are there any foods for which the area or region is known?
7. What languages were/are spoken in the area?
8. What types of people live in the area?
9. What is your area famous for?

Once students have completed their journal entries, ask them to share discoveries in small groups. Then ask for a volunteer to share his or her entry with the class.



Six Jewel Rivers

Sleep on horseback,
The far moon in a continuing dream,
Steam of roasting tea.

Basho 1644-1694

At this point, your students should have had a chance to write their journal entries on the cultural history of their place and to review and expand upon their earlier Lesson One journal entries describing the characteristics of the place. In preparation for writing their poems, your students will first begin a new journal entry, using the "Life is the Teacher: Writing Poems from Daily Experience" lesson as guidance for refining their earlier observations. Once they have brainstormed what will become lines of poetry for their "Web of Life" poems, they will begin to assemble their poems following the structure of the "Web of Life."

To prepare for this part of the exercise, familiarize yourself with the "Life is the Teacher: Writing Poems from Daily Experience" by Sandford Lyne. The "Web of Life" poem is an exercise in poetry writing that leads students from the outside to the inside, from what they observe to what they feel. It asks them to think about the personal world around them: its history, weather, landscape, people, and customs. Using what they have

already gathered in their journals, students will begin to write lines of poems in answer to questions that lead them through the web of life. The "Web of Life" poem asks students to follow two rules of the Chinese poet: to be in the here and now and to be honest. In following the directions, your students learn how to show, rather than tell, their feelings in poetry. You may want to introduce students to the Japanese Haiku, another type of poem that uses imagery, connotation, and the juxtaposition of images (often the pairing of unlike images) to impart meaning.

Haiku may also help your students understand the Chinese concept of being in the here and now, and the idea of "showing, not telling" in a poem. A haiku is seventeen syllables divided into three lines. The first line is five syllables, the second line is seven syllables, and the third line is five syllables. Focus on how these poems are in the present tense and how they work with sensory imagery to impart meaning (often emotional meaning rather than logical meaning). You might have your students practice writing a few haiku. Once everyone has grasped these concepts, lead your students through the "Web of Life" with a series of questions that will prompt them to create lines of poetry out of their journal observations.

Resources

"Life is the Teacher: Writing Poems from Daily Experience" by Sanford Lyne in the River of Words K-12 Curriculum.

coloradohumanities.org/ccftb/river%20of%20words/Unit%204/poetrylifeisthe_teacher.pdf

This poetry lesson presents a specific way of looking at and writing poetry and offers a detailed plan for guiding your students into the "Web of Life" poem. Thanks to River of Words for use of this document here.

Children's Haiku Garden

homepage2.nifty.com/haiku-eg/

This website offers a variety of haiku poems written by children across the world. Each haiku is accompanied by an illustration.

Poem Sample

"After the Rain" is in the spirit of the "Web of Life poem"

After The Rain

Gentle hands sway the trees and
Ruffle the grasses beneath them.
The storm cloud's last tears hit the street.
Painting it glossy black.
Earth's breath whisks the last
of the gray from the sky
To expose pale sun.
The trees are a new green,
Straight from the painter's palette.
Birds chorus from every bough,
Celebrating the sun's renewal.
We walk, leash to hand,
Six feet treading a joyous path
through the puddles.

Ingrid Hoff, Grade 8, Place Middle School
Denver Teacher: Sharon Summers
2004 River of Words Contest
Colorado Winner, 3rd Place



For the Young

Best thing here is for the very young to stick with the haiku form. The challenge will be to help your students describe their spot with concrete language and to discover a surprise about their spot or how they feel about their spot.

Resources

Haiku Writing Worksheet

worddance.com

Word Dance is an online quarterly creative writing and art journal for K-8 students. Its haiku worksheet clearly explains the concepts of the form and offers examples from their peers.

Children's Haiku Garden

homepage2.nifty.com/haiku-eg/

This website offers a variety of haiku poems written by children across the world. Each haiku is accompanied by an illustration

5

Letter from the Mesa Verde Puebloan People (AD 600 to AD 1300) or the San Luis 1800s Hispano Community

The Puebloan (known also as the Anasazi or “Ancient Ones”) and the Hispano (early Hispanic) people are some of our earliest and most fascinating inhabitants of Colorado. More than 1,000 years ago, the Puebloans lived in canyons and mesas in what is now known as Mesa Verde. Etching reservoirs with deer horns and sticks, the Puebloans were able to trap the infrequent rain run-off of the canyons and mesas and create agricultural meccas that allowed whole communities to exist in this stark, foreboding environment. The famed cliff dwellings of Mesa Verda were built some time after the reservoirs dried up.

Following the Los Caminos Antiguos, or The Ancient Roads, which were pathways traveled by people living thousands of years ago, immigrants from what we now call New Mexico built the first permanent settlement in the San Luis Valley in 1851. This Hispano community dug irrigation ditches, or acequias, by hand in order to farm wheat, beans, and corn in these arid lands. The San Luis People’s Ditch is the oldest working irrigation ditch in Colorado.

In this lesson, students will first discuss global warming and its effects on themselves and their communities. Students will then explore the history and culture of either the Puebloan or Hispano people through text, photographs and virtual tours found on the internet, using their journals to record historical community living conditions, including how water was stored and used for home and farming use. Once students have compiled their background material, they will compose poems in the form of a letter poem, or Epistle poem, modeled after Ezra Pound’s letter poem, “The River-Merchant’s Wife,” and written in the voice of an imagined Puebloan or Hispano community member. In these letter poems, the speaker will give advice on how to live through climate change, drawing on his or her own ancient methods and experiences.



Exploring the People

Introduce the Puebloans and the early Hispano people. Ask your students to choose one of the two cultures, Puebloan or Hispano, to explore. Explain to your students that the people in both of these cultures had to deal with harsh, arid landscapes, but found ways to cope with these conditions. Allow your students to use the internet for research. Students should record their research in their journals. If you divide the class into groups, have the groups share their findings with each other.

Now that your students have completed their explorations into either the Puebloan or early Hispano culture, it is time for them to begin crafting their letter or epistle poems. The Epistle or Letter poem goes far back into our literary history, perhaps even further than Horace and Ovid. The letter poem is characterized by “plain diction, personal details and questions to lend a familiarity.” Certainly, William Carlos Williams in his poem, “This is Just to Say,” pushed that form to another level of brevity and familiarity.



This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

William Carlos Williams

The key is familiarity, which calls for the use of specific details and images that your students will create from the information they have gathered on either the Puebloan or the Hispano culture. Taking Ezra Pound's poem, "The River-Merchant's Wife" as a model, your students will also see that the letter poem is addressed directly to a specific "you," rather than to a general audience.

The River-Merchant's Wife

While my hair was still cut straight across
 my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river
 of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown,
 the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows
 of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

The letter poem is another example of the persona poem, and builds on the information in Lesson Two. Your students will be imaginatively creating the speaker of the poem. Instead of an object or thing, the speaker is another person, someone from another time, culture, and history. Students will bring life to their poems, and their speakers, by filling the letter poem with the sights, words, and experiences of that ancient time.

The speaker has a particular way of speaking, of expressing him or herself. The speaker of the poem has a particular relationship with the person he or she is writing. In your students' letter poems, the speaker from the ancient culture will provide advice on how to deal with climate change. Below is one other example.

Letter to the Architect

Not even you can keep me from
mentioning the fish, their beauty of
scaled brevity, their clipped-swishing
tails funneling in everything animal.
Wintertime when I saw them, their
pursed old ladies' mouths, gaping under
pooled clarity to share some gulled-up gossip.
Their bones, pure equilateral, poked stripes
at base and height, bereft of architects errors
or human compensation. I remember then
your last letter; you wrote you couldn't cut
another miter, solder another joint, pee
another bit of blue from between your fingertips.
I'm going to crack soon, you said.
There must be some way to perfection
in this grasping for centimeters. The stick
will stay straight, the model be done,
done beautifully and one well someday.
I wrote back—I only know the cod with their
paling rib bones, their geometry unwarped by cold.
I know their tunnels dug frost-time underwater,
their crossings of snowflake symmetry. When
the thaws come, their finned bodies filter
the halfway ice like clean spectra.
You must know—the sight is exquisite.
If only I could give the gift of fish-making
in as many words as this.

Rebecca Givens, 15,
River of Words Images and Poetry in Praise of Water
Anthology (River of Words)

Resources

Ezra Pound

americanpoems.com/poets/ezrapound/
Ezra Pound, "The River-Merchant's Wife"
poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15425
The Academy of American Poets website

Letter Poem Creator

readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/letter-poem-creator-30019

This interactive website presents an example of a letter poem being written from an actual letter written by a child. It follows the William Carlos Williams' format of a very simple letter poem in "This Is Just to Say," and contains a link to information about the use of line breaks in creating a letter poem out of a letter.

"This Is Just to Say," By William Carlos Williams. Copyright © 1962 by William Carlos Williams. "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is based on the first of Li Po's "Two Letters from Chang-Kan." Copyright © 1956, 1957 by Ezra Pound. Both poems are used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved. No part of these poems may be reproduced in any form without the written consent of the publisher.



Science Extension Activity

Dealing with Climate Change

Project WET's Discover a Watershed: The Colorado curriculum provides an online activity that will augment your students' knowledge of how some Native American tribes have historically dealt with climate change.

"Desert Gardens" examines how Colorado Basin tribes have adapted to a region marked by aridity through their use of traditional crops and unique farming techniques. Your students will examine maps showing western land ownership and precipitation levels throughout the basin as well as experimenting with traditional recipes made from the basin's native plants.

Visit projectwet.org/water-resources-education/regional-water-education/ to find helpful information regarding activity overviews, materials preparation, maps, procedure and discussion questions. in both English and Spanish.

Resources

Southern Nevada Water Authority's Conservation House

h2ouniversity.org/html/library_conservation_house
An interactive page providing information on conserving water within the home.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Drought Monitor

drought.unl.edu/dm/
Provides current drought conditions and drought forecasts throughout the U.S.

U.S. Geological Survey

usgs.gov/state/state.asp?State=CO
This site provides real-time information about streamflow conditions, flooding, groundwater, and drought. Instructors can manipulate data to produce various graphs and charts to represent the characteristics of the state's streams and rivers.

Secondary Resources

Project WET's Discover Drought
store.projectwet.org

How can there be a drought in a rain forest—or in the desert? What exactly is a drought? Learn these answers and more, such as the roles of snowpack and ground water, droughts around the world and throughout history, predicting and planning for drought, plant and animal adaptations, and dendochronology. For students age 8-12. See projectwet.org/watercourse/ for more information.

Project WET's Conserve Water Educators Guide

projectwet.org/wetguide

This text provides teachers of middle school and high school students with the ins and outs of water conservation. Background information offers a hydrologic primer; past, present, and future water conservation issues; and case studies ranging from a rancher in west Texas to an ice cream factory in Massachusetts. These real-life examples encourage students to use critical thinking skills to examine different sides of each situation. See projectwet.org/watercourse/ for more information.



For the Young

We would suggest some very simple information on how water was stored and used in the Puebloan and Hispano cultures. Present pictures of water jugs, the reservoirs, the irrigation ditches, and ask students to draw pictures of what they imagine life to be like at that time.

Keep the letter poem format simple, following William Carlos Williams' lead with "This is Just to Say." The emphasis here should be on creating a few simple images or picture words from the Puebloan and Hispano culture and then experimenting with line breaks to create the poem. The speaker can address the reader, giving advice or expressing sympathy for climate change.

Resources

Letter Poem Creator

readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/letter-poem-creator-30019

The interactive Read Write and Think website presents an example of a letter poem being written from an actual letter written by a child. It follows William Carlos Williams' format of a very simple letter poem. It also contains a link to information about the use of line breaks in creating a letter poem out of a letter.

