"SEATTLE WRITES" LESSON PLANS

by Mike Hickey, 2009 Seattle Poet Populist

Through the "Seattle Writes" program, citizens young and old are invited to write a poem and share it online. In 2009, the theme of the program is NEIGHBORS. Poets will enter their poems directly online at www.poetpopulist.org.

Poets must be residents of King County, Washington State. Posted work will remain online for the public to read; 2009 Seattle Poet Populist Mike Hickey will choose a limited number of pieces for a printed book.

For teachers, Mike has written three lesson plans to integrate the program with classroom writing exercises.

Here are three interactive poetry writing lesson plans to use in class with your students. I use them in my college level courses, but they are fun and great imagination-builders for any age group.

1) Neighbors

Each student participates by saying one thing that would make the best neighbor in the world. The teacher fills up the left side of the board with these. Then everyone provides an idea that would describe the worst neighbor in the world. These fill up the right side of the board. Then everyone writes about what it'd be like of these two neighbors lived on either side of you.

FINAL NOTE: Perhaps one of these poems, especially #3, can be used as is or revised for our Poet Populist theme NEIGHBORS, but everyone should feel free to write a new poem for the website if they'd like. Ideally, we'd like to have every student and teacher (and principal) write a poem for the website during April, which is National Poetry Month.

2) The Cool Moon

The instructor starts by writing the phrase "the cool moon" on the board. Then every student adds another phrase that begins with the definite article "the" and an adjective and a noun. No adjectives or nouns should be repeated. I usually go around the room 2 or 3 times. I encourage students to say the first thing that comes to mind. Everyone participates – no one is allowed to "pass."

Then, when everyone has had at least a couple turns and the board is filled, I read all the phrases back to the class. This is where the fun begins! We mix and match adjectives and nouns that weren't initially together, and I allow the students to shout these out in class. The goal is to come up with new combinations and juxtapositions that are unexpected and unpredictable, which is a vital element in writing poems.

Now, it's time to write. Each student picks one of the phrases, either an original on the board or one of the new hybrids, and writes that at the top of the page as the title of his/her poem. Then they write a story using that phrase as a spring board. I

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usually ask my students to write as fast as they can for 5, 10, or 15 minutes (some grades write faster than others). They are not allowed to erase or stop to think of what to write. The pen must be in contact with the paper at all times. Ideally, they will tap into the subconscious mind where all the good dreams and memories and poem ideas are hiding and hibernating.

Finally, when time is up, all pens stop and volunteers read their poems aloud. Students are sometimes reluctant to read at first, but when one brave soul breaks the ice there is typically a steady stream of eager readers. Sometimes the poems are serious, sometimes they're funny, but my role as a teacher is to encourage participation and show them that writing is fun. Last quarter, one student wrote about "the funky chicken" that liked to salsa dance and wear dark sunglasses - now that's a poem!

3) Person / Place

Similar to "the cool moon", everyone participates in this exercise as well. First, each student gives the instructor a profession/occupation, and the teacher writes it on the right side of the board: doctor, lion tamer, mail carrier, lawyer, teacher, circus clown, etc. Then, each student says a place: parking lot, kitchen, construction site, hospital, courtroom, classroom, etc. The teacher writes these on the left side of the board.

Next, the students write a place and an occupation on the top of the page. This becomes their title. But again, the idea is to be unpredictable. Don't put a doctor in a hospital or a teacher in the classroom. Put the person in a place where he/she normally WOULDN'T be found: a swimmer on the moon, a ballerina in McDonald's, a mime in a cemetery. Then the students write a story about this person/place.

Again, I allow some time at the end of the period for volunteers to read. I always participate, too, and I'm never shy about volunteering to read my own offering, even if it isn't very good. The objective isn't to be "good," it's to have fun with words and nurture a love for language and imagery.

SEATTLE WRITES FAQ

Here are some Frequently Asked Questions (and answers) about Seattle Writes, plus some writing prompts, compiled by 2009 Poet Populist Mike Hickey. (This information is also offered on the web to writers who have gotten stuck in their process.)

Does poetry have to rhyme?
No. In fact, "free verse" is a great way to find and develop one's voice without the limitations of end rhyme.

Is there a theme?
Yes, our theme is NEIGHBORS.

Does the poem have to rhyme?
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How long should a poem be?
For this project, the maximum number of lines is 30.

Does a poem need punctuation?
Not always. It just depends on the poem.

Does verb tense matter?
Generally speaking, simple present tense enhances the immediacy of the poem.

What makes a poem good?
Usually a poem is good if it makes the reader think hard, feel a strong emotion, or both.

Does a poem have to mean something?
Some poems tell a story and they usually do mean something, they have a point. Some poems create a mood or tone and these are often referred to as "tonal" poems. Here, the meaning is often less obvious or direct. Either way, it's best not to guide the poem but to let the poem guide you. Often, if the poem has a point, you won't know what it is until you've written it.

What if I get stuck and can't think of anything to write?
Don't worry, that happens a lot. Here are some ideas to get you started:

WRITE A POEM IN WHICH…

1) …your neighbor has secret powers.
2) …your neighbor's house is magic.
3) …your neighbor's house is haunted.
4) …your neighbor does something special that you'd like to do too.
5) …the worms in your neighbor's garden talk to each other.
6) …your neighbor is not a person but: a dog, a bug, a wind chime, fence, rock, trash can, sidewalk, telephone pole, street light, lawnmower, storage shed.
7) …in which you make up a brand new word that describes your neighbor.

OR

8) Write a list of five words that describe your neighbor and use them all in a poem.
9) Write a list of five words that mean "good neighbor" and five words that mean "bad neighbor" and use them all in a poem. *Style points: one of the words in each list should be made-up words.*
10) Imagine the perfect neighbor, and pretend they are writing you a letter. Start with "Dear Neighbor." Then what do they say?

Any more advice?
Yes! As Einstein said, "Imagination is more important that knowledge." Let's prove him right!

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