

FORMULA POETRY

Poetry has a poor reputation in the junior high classroom. Belligerent boys have informed me that poetry is “flowers and rhymes and mushy love-stuff” written only by girls or less than manly men. Their female counterparts sigh at such lack of sensitivity and proceed to write reams of flowery, rhyming, mushy love-stuff. Is there way out?

There is, and it’s called *formulaic poetry*. Writing poetry by formula takes some of the fear and intimidation out of the composing process and, at the same time, makes it more palatable for those reluctant poets and less sing-songy for those caught up in the cuteness of it all.

A few suggestions: formulas are gimmicks and certainly have their place, but they are only a means to an end. No formula is sacred; don’t be afraid to go with the good idea because it doesn’t fit the formula. Improvise! That’s how most formulas are born. Have fun, show your enthusiasm, read student work aloud often, and publish it whenever you can. You won’t regret it.

I. GETTING STARTED: ONE LINERS AND COLLECTIVE POETRY

A poem can be a collection of ***one-liners*** that follow the same pattern. These can be done individually or each person in the class can contribute a line.

Examples: I used to be... but now I am...
 I’ll never tell you...
 I remember...
 I wish...
 The most amazing thing I’ve ever seen...

One-liners can be taken seriously or humorously. Try them both ways and see what students come up with. The following pattern is best when it is wild, zany, and imaginative as possible. It is particularly suited as a ***collective*** poem.

I wish I were adjective color person or thing verb phrase .

(I wish I were a hilarious pink billboard squatting on Mars)

II. SIMILE POEMS

A ***simile*** poem is just a stack of similes piled on top of a particular subject.

As lonely as a tree without leaves
 As lonely as an abandoned pup
 As lonely as footsteps in the rain
 Is my house in the quiet of the night.

As cold as a polar bear’s breath
 As cold as a penguin’s flippers
 As cold as an ice cube down my back
 Are my bare hands while making a snowball.

III. EMOTIONS AND SENSES

1. Start the first line with the name of an emotion (brainstorm first). Finish the line by telling what color it is.
2. Tell what the emotion sounds like.
3. Tell what it smells like.

4. Tell what it tastes like.
5. Tell what it feels like.

Example: Loneliness is gray.
 It sounds like a cold winter wind.
 It smells like an attic in autumn.
 It tastes like bitter aspirin.
 Loneliness feels like a tear gently running down your face.

IV. CONTRAST POEMS

A ***contrast*** poem has two parts. Each part shows the different side of a person, a thing, or an idea. Choose two different ways of describing or looking at the subject. Let your subject be your title.

Traveling

Cars
 zoom by on the highway.
 Drivers worry about getting
 there on time.

I watch them as I
 walk along.
 No hurry.
 But plenty to see.

Rock Concert

Amplify the words and music
 for thousands of screaming fans.
 Every second must be filled
 with sound.

Hours later, everyone is
 gone.
 My footsteps echo
 through the empty hall.

V. FEELINGS ON FOUR

1. The subject of the poem (becomes the title)
2. Two adjectives that describe the subject
3. A verb phrase
4. A question or statement about the subject

Apple

Red and tart
 Falling from the tree
 Why do you always have a
 worm?

Football

Tan and tough
 Smashing through the sky
 You always save your
 fumbles for me.

Paper

White and thin
 Lying on my desk
 Why can't you write my
 theme?

VI. TRADITIONAL HAIKU (three lines, 5—7—5 syllables)

In the falling snow
 A laughing boy holds out his palms
 Until they turn white (Richard Wright)

The geese flying south
 In a long row and V-shaped
 Pulling in winter.

VII. WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY POEMS

Each line should answer one of those questions—usually in that order. The poem should be short and to the point.

Born

The mare
Gave birth to the colt
After midnight
In her stall
Because it was time.

Waiting

The old woman
Sits quietly
In a waiting room
On a winter day
What would you do if you had a toothache?

VIII. HAIKUESTION

Similar to the haiku – the only difference is that the *haikuestion* poses a question at the end of the poem. The question gives the poem a twist that makes the reader stop and think for a moment.

Syllables

- (5) English, math, and French
 - (7) I work hard to get an A
 - (5) Studying long hours
- Why is studying so easy for my brother?

IX. PEOPLE POETRY

1. You tell whom you are writing about.
2. You describe the person with 2 adjectives connected by **and** or **but**.
3. You use a verb and an adjective to show this person in a typical action.
4. You think up a comparison to show a special quality this person has.
5. You close the poem with an **If only** phrase which expresses something you wish for regarding this person.

Tony Dorsett

Competitive but cool-headed
Accelerates rapidly
As fast as a top fuel dragster --
If only he could carry the winning pass!

My Baby Brother

Whiny and wet
Cries constantly
As noisy as a thousand screeching tires--
If only he will grow up happy.

X. WHAT GOOD LUCK, WHAT BAD LUCK (self-explanatory)

What good luck, it's Saturday... What bad luck, it's raining
the teacher's absent... the principal's substituting
double bubblegum... new braces
a new locker... someone's old sneakers in it
a puppy... it's not housebroken

I finished my math...I did the wrong page

What good luck, I hit the ball out of the field.
 What bad luck, it went through a window.
 What good luck, the window was open.
 What bad luck, my dad was sitting in front of it.
 What good luck, the ball missed him.
 What bad luck, it knocked over a lamp.
 What good luck, the lamp wasn't broken.
 What bad luck, the mirror behind it was.

XI. DIAMENTE

1. Write down a noun.
2. Two adjectives describing the noun
3. Three participles (words ending in “-ing” or “-ed”)
4. Four nouns related to the subject – the second two nouns have meaning opposite to the first two.
 This is the transition line of the poem.
5. Three participles indicating change or development of the subject.
6. Two adjectives that carry on the idea of change and development.
7. A noun that is the opposite of the subject.

EXAMPLES:

Stranger
 New, different
 Seeing, meeting, talking
 Acquaintance, associate — member, pal
 Liking, enjoying, seeking
 Familiar, trusted
 Friend

Wolfpack
 Unbelievable, fantastic
 Struggling, scoring, winning
 ACC champs, destiny's darlings, cardiac kids, Final 4
 Thrilling, exciting, celebrating
 NUMBER ONE!

--6th Graders, Angier Middle School, Raleigh, NC

XII. REMEMBERING POEM

Remembering, I see (his/her) face—

A face _____.
 A face _____.
 A face _____.

Remembering, (his/her) face I see _____.

I remember
 How _____
 and how _____.
 This face means _____ to me.