What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

This is the ultimate "grab-and-go" book for ELA teachers—perfect for quick inspiration and engaging lessons. More than just activities, it keeps its promises and offers real teacher insights, adaptable plans, and strategies for 100% engagement. Centered on why literature matters, it's a must-have resource for all high school ELA educators.

—Brandon Abdon
Lecturer, English and Education, Western Kentucky University

Engaging students is the key to growing their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. For a teacher, there's no better way to enhance your engagement strategies than to model leading educators who have mastered this art. I turn to Brian Sztabnik and Susan Barber when I have questions in this area, and with 100% Engagement, *we can all have their insights at our fingertips.*

—Emily Kirkpatrick
Executive Director, NCTE

This collection of lessons helped me to envision new strategies for my own classroom. This is a book that gives me hope. The clear objectives, the specificity of the lesson directions, and the reasoning behind them make this book both inspirational and practical. It is clear that the writers are real classroom teachers successfully designing meaningful instruction even in the face of challenges that all teachers experience.

—Brett Vogelsinger
High school teacher and author of *Poetry Pauses* and *Artful AI in Writing Instruction*

Too many folks still believe that students are motivated by only certain personalities or gimmicks or race-to-the-bottom engagement hacks. Brian and Susan's excellent book offers 33 classroom-tested lessons that make rigorous, student-centered learning the norm. As you apprentice yourself to these lessons, just watch what happens to your heart and mind and those of your students.

—Dave Stuart Jr.
High school teacher and author of *These 6 Things* and *The Will to Learn*

There are books about engagement, and then there's this *book—because Sztabnik and Barber aren't just experienced teachers; they're engagement scientists who have mapped out the ultimate blueprint for transforming passive students into passionate learners and making every class electric.*

—Todd Finley
Associate Professor, English Education, East Carolina University

Brian Sztabnik and Susan Barber offer dynamic and engaging lessons that are strategically crafted to spark student interest while maximizing learning. 100% Engagement *is an invaluable resource for any educator looking to elevate their teaching.*

—Melissa Alter Smith
Founder of Teach Living Poets, National Board Certified teacher, AP consultant, and co-author of *The Norton Guide to AP Literature: Writing & Skills*

In this book, Brian Sztabnik and Susan Barber, two experienced and respected teachers, show teachers what it looks like to be engaging and effective—to create a classroom and curriculum through which students not only learn but also come to love what they find in their English classes.

—Jim Burke
Author of more than 20 bestselling books including *Teaching Better Day by Day* and *The Common Core Companion*

Disaffected students making you tear your hair out? Susan Barber and Brian Sztabnik offer a plan for moving students from compliance and complaint to connection—connection with their peers, connection with engaging literature, and connection with themselves as learners. These 33 lessons are truly electric!

—Carol Jago
Long-time English teacher, past president of NCTE, and Associate Director of the California Reading Association at UCLA

Whether you're a new educator overwhelmed by all the requirements of the job or a veteran teacher with stale materials, this text will inspire! 100% Engagement *helps teachers find engaging strategies to use with quality texts. I found applications in just the first lesson, and by the end the ideas were exploding!*

—Gina Kortuem
Creator of Lit & More, a website and brand of educational resources for high school teachers

This book is an absolute must-read for any English teacher. Throughout it, Susan and Brian masterfully dispel many contemporary teaching and learning myths by intertwining their own experiences with their content expertise. Their dynamic lessons provide a flexible yet clear blueprint for developing an engaging classroom where, as they write, student "motivation is high and interactions are based on mutual respect and appreciation."

—Timm Freitas
Teacher, academic coach, content creator, and Founder of The Garden of English LLC

Susan Barber and Brian Sztabnik first shred the myths that cause teachers to shy away from classroom engagement—and then proceed to provide dozens and dozens of clear lessons that engage students as the learning is turned over to them. Energy and learning generated in all kinds of classrooms! An immensely enlightening and useful resource.

—Peggy O'Brien
Founding Director of Education, Folger Shakespeare Library

100% Engagement

To Jess and Scott, who not only put up with us while we teach, write, and train teachers but also have encouraged us to do so.

To classroom teachers: You are the ones who are showing up and doing the daily work. You are our friends, our colleagues, our inspiration. We see you.

100% Engagement

33 Lessons to Promote Participation, Beat Boredom, and Deepen Learning in the ELA Classroom

Brian Sztabnik

Susan Barber

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Literacy

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FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
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https://companion.corwin.com/courses/100_Engagement

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Modoc, IN

Wendy Towle, EdD
Director of Curriculum, Instruction, Staff Development and Planning, Tredyffrin/Easttown School District
Wayne, PA

Melissa Wood-Glusac
High School English Teacher, CVUSD/Thousand Oaks High School
Thousand Oaks, CA

About the Authors

Brian Sztabnik is just a man trying to do good in and out of the classroom. He teaches Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature and Composition, English 11, College Reading and Writing, and The Poetry of Rock and Roll at Miller Place High School, where he has worked since 2008. He also coaches the boys' basketball team for the Panthers. Over the past decade he has worked as an AP Reader and served on the Test Development Committee. In 2018, he was a finalist for the New York State Teacher of the Year. Brian also created and hosted the *Talks With Teachers* podcast, which was a number-one K–12 show on iTunes. When he's not teaching, coaching, or writing, Brian is an avid explorer of New York City's museums, restaurants, and coffee shops.

Susan Barber teaches AP English Literature and Dramatic Writing for TV, Film, and Theatre at Midtown High School in Atlanta, Georgia, and serves as the cochair of the Test Development Committee for AP Literature. She has offered training at the National Council of Teachers of English, Georgia Council of Teachers of English, and Folger Shakespeare Library and frequently leads English language arts workshops across the country. Her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Edutopia*, and she is the coauthor of *The Norton Guide to AP Literature*. Susan, however, is most proud of the work she does on a daily basis in E216 and never tires of the beauty and chaos of the classroom. You can find her along with Brian Sztabnik sharing their thoughts on their site MuchAdoAboutTeaching.com.

Introduction

There is a myth that says engagement is the purview of young, fun, and modern teachers. They draw students in by building rapport around fashion, music, or sports. They turn everything into a Kahoot! or Quizlet so all facets of learning become gamified. They pluck the best samples from their future Rembrandts and Picassos and post them on Instagram, making everyone green with envy.

If you subscribe to this myth, engagement is all parts personality and no part perspiration.

Myths like this work because they exclude or overlook so much. They explain a complex phenomenon in a simple way. The real answer, always, is much broader, more nuanced, and more inclusive. The truth is we all have the capacity to create classrooms that immerse our students in rich and rigorous learning, yet we also have the power to develop a boring, monotonous environment that leaves our students staring like zombies into their phones.

Now, maybe more than ever, school has become an albatross of boredom for many students, and despite our best efforts, they won't engage with us, with each other, or with the subject matter.

How do we make the process of thinking, questioning, and expressing ideas welcoming and invigorating again? How do we capture students' attention, engage them in thought and wonder, and open their eyes to new capacities for hope and possibility, especially when that work is much harder than ever before?

This book will help foster the type of classroom where student motivation is high and interactions are based on mutual respect and appreciation. Students will come to class craving genuine experiences and relishing in the process of learning, and you will feel supported in your efforts.

We have ways for you to achieve this—33, in fact. Yes, 100% participation and even 100% engagement is still possible.

We are teachers with nearly 50 years of combined classroom experience, and we see what you see. As our classrooms have switched from the tangible learning environment of notebooks, pens, papers, and projects to a digital one with Chromebooks, dashboards, spreadsheets, and Docs, our students are turning to their screens to escape learning rather than immerse themselves in it. They have put up barriers that have increased the distance between us and them and between them and learning.

We are right there with you.

Attention and Motivation in Today's Classroom

When social media was in its infancy, we would overhear whispers about Myspace from our students near the end of the period when they had a few minutes to chat. Back then, social media was recreation, a fun diversion that students could turn to after the school day. Now it can be an addictive, all-encompassing part of their lives. We fear that when we hand our students Steinbeck and Shakespeare, their consciousness is already compelled by Snapchat and Instagram. We still have those same few minutes left at the end of a period, but now our students are silent. They turn to their phones rather than each other.

To add to that challenge, as the digital world came to command our students' consciousness, we experienced a pandemic that tore through the seams of a social fabric that stitched schools, teachers, students, and parents together. That era isolated us all. It disrupted routines and structures and stunted student social development at crucial stages, inflicting fear and distrust in many.

A recent survey, conducted by the EdWeek Research Center between December 2022 and February 2023, found that 87% of teachers saw lower motivation in students and 82% recognized lower student morale after the pandemic (Prothero, 2023).

We believe all is not lost. We know the hearts and minds of students crave rich learning experiences. We see opportunities to engage them in deep and immersive lessons once again, and we want to share the solutions to these problems.

On Engagement

To start, let us move past the old idea of engagement, which comes from the French *engager*, meaning "to bind" by promise or oath. One common definition today still hints at this old-school mentality—"to provide occupation for" or "involve" someone in an activity (Merriam-Webster, 2025a).

That may have worked 20 or 30 years ago when we thought of engagement as compliance, but times have changed. Now it is not enough for students to simply be busy with work. We have to do better than merely occupy them with task after task.

A more inspiring definition from Merriam-Webster (2025b) for engagement exists a little further down the page. It speaks to the moment we all face: "the state of being engaged"—that is, "emotional involvement or commitment."

That definition is the North Star of this book. The 33 lessons within present opportunities for students to take pride in their performance and become absorbed in the moment. Your students will be talking, collaborating, designing, thinking, drawing, making, writing, and doing all the things that make learning so much fun. They will be out of their

seats, up at the board, hanging things on the back wall, and existing in virtual spaces.

These lessons come from our classrooms, but more importantly, they come from the belief that as education evolves, some things remain immutable—students want to be seen, they would rather interact than sit, they like to be heard rather than spoken to, and they want to feel a part of something rather than be isolated.

Time and time again we have seen our students excited to come to our classes because these lessons have made our English classrooms a space of opportunity and growth rather than a confine of intimidation and limitation. We have seen our students grow comfortable taking risks as rigorous material is approached in a way that allows for multiple entry points so that everyone can flourish. Creativity is celebrated throughout these lessons. We honor the artistry of the works that we teach, but that appreciation is equally matched by the love that we exude for our students' work.

We have 10 core beliefs that have guided us as we designed these lessons and implemented them in our classrooms. They have enabled us to overcome the obstacles we described earlier and get our students participating in extraordinary ways. They represent the shifts that need to occur to transform any classroom from a boring, repetitive, and uninspired place to one where dynamic learning can occur.

Table 0.1 Ten Core Beliefs That Guide This Book

1.	*Myth:* Learning is passive.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Learning occurs when students are actively involved, using multiple modalities in creative ways.**
2.	*Myth:* Students complete work for compliance.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Students see meaning and value in the work they complete.**
3.	*Myth:* Students fear putting themselves out there.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Students are connected to something bigger than themselves and feel safe taking academic risks.**
4.	*Myth:* The teacher tells the students what to think about the literature.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Literature speaks to students about themselves.**
5.	*Myth:* Learning occurs in isolation.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Learning through collaboration is an essential part of a classroom community.**
6.	*Myth:* Questions are direct and closed.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Questions are open and inviting to all.**

(Continued)

(Continued)

7.	*Myth:* The teacher looks for one correct answer.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Multiple answers reveal the diversity of students and how each one thinks.**
8.	*Myth:* Technology is incorporated for the sake of using technology.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Technology is a tool for 21st-century thinking.**
9.	*Myth:* The teacher controls how knowledge is disseminated.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **The teacher facilitates an environment in which students discover knowledge on their own terms.**
10.	*Myth:* Lessons are repetitive, rote, and stale, often taken from a curriculum guide.	⇨	*Core Belief:* **Lessons are wonderfully dynamic, drawing inspiration from beyond the walls of the classroom.**

It is in this spirit that we welcome you to use this book as a resource. Each lesson has advice on adaptations because the approaches work across grade levels and student populations. The lessons do not need to be given in order. Turn to this book on Sunday night when you have no idea what to teach on Monday. Place it by your side as you plan your next unit. Dedicate a day each week to trying something new within. Most of all, make the choice to be dynamic and invigorating, using this book as a catalyst to take your teaching and your classroom to the next level.

About the Lesson Structure

The lessons in this book are organized by genre—poetry, short fiction, novels and dramas, and writing—and have a common structure to make it easier for you to pick up each one and get started quickly. The lesson structure is as follows:

Lesson Learning Objective

Each lesson starts with an objective to highlight what the lesson is designed to teach students.

Background

In the Background section, we share our personal experiences by giving you the stories behind our lessons. Each section is written either by Susan or by Brian (you'll see the signature noted at the end to reflect who is writing). We reflect back on the problem we wanted to overcome, the inspiration that led to our lightbulb moment, or the really cool idea we saw elsewhere and wanted to shape in our own mold.

From Inspiration to Reality

Whenever we share materials online with teachers, we inevitably get follow-up questions via email or Facebook groups asking, "This is great, but what does the full lesson look like in your classroom?" Well, here it is. In this section we walk you through everything we (and the students) do in the lesson. We share the questions we ask, the diagrams we use, the instructions we provide, and so much more so that you can visualize the lesson and see how it can work in your room. This section for each lesson is written by one author (Brian or Susan) as well.

Variations

The lessons in this book are adaptable to various grade levels as well as skill levels. The Variations part of each lesson incorporates suggestions to help you tailor the lesson to meet the needs of your students.

The Lesson Plan

Want a formal lesson plan? We've got you covered. This section gives everything you need to know about planning for and delivering the lesson, including time required, materials, and a step-by-step plan for an opening, main, and closing activity.

How to Get 100% Engagement

To close each lesson, this section shares the tips and tricks that help make the lesson memorable and ensure that every student in the classroom is participating and engaged.

PART I

POETRY LESSONS

Inspire Students to Discover the Power and Passion of Poetry

We have all seen the caricature in children's cartoons portraying poets dressed in costume, reading from a scroll, and speaking with unnecessarily elaborate language. From an early age, children are coerced into thinking that poetry should be difficult, obtuse, and the realm of people who want to sound smart. When they arrive in our classrooms, students often draw on those preconceived notions, making quick assumptions about poetry before they even experience it. What English teacher hasn't experienced the groans and whimpers when that first poem is handed out?

It is time to relish the opportunity to transform those preconceived notions. The nine lessons in this section are anything but difficult or obtuse. They don't take students on a trip to the past filled with arcane language and flowery expressions. These lessons help students journey inward, experiencing the modern sensation Walt Whitman describes in "One's-Self I Sing" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.i):

> Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
>
> Cheerful, for the freest action form'd under the laws divine,
>
> The Modern Man I sing.

Within this section, you will find lessons that teach students to see poetry from a different lens—one of passion and power. Your students get to be on the other side of the equation and think like poets. They will have the chance to play with words and lines in Lessons 1 and 3, investigate the DNA of a poem in Lessons 5 and 9, reinvent poems by thinking like a poet

in Lesson 4 and mastering the masters in Lesson 8, and go on poetry speed dates in Lesson 7, and you will gain ideas for introducing the genre of poetry by having students write letters (Lesson 2) and look at Magic Eye Images (Lesson 6). It is no longer about being intimidated by poetry, and more about immersing in its creative opportunities. Teaching from a place of opportunity and empowerment transforms the experience. Students no longer dread each poem that is passed out, and we get to match poetry's magic with lessons that dazzle.

Poetry Lessons

Cutting Up Poems

LESSON 1

Lesson Learning Objective

In this lesson, students will practice close reading skills, annotation, and building their interpretation of a poem. In addition, this activity will help students become more comfortable reading and working with poems.

Background

I have been obsessed with the idea of deconstruction not only as a means of thinking about structure but also as a way to encourage students to read closely for a long time. The idea for this lesson was shaped by the idea of working on a puzzle. How do the pieces fit together to make a whole picture? What piece fits where? What's the process for figuring out which piece fits where?

Susan Barber

Susan

From Inspiration to Reality in Susan's Classroom

The first time I did this lesson I experimented with the poem "The Crossing" by Ruth Moose (Poetry Foundation, n.d.a). As a high school teacher, I love this poem because it has so many implications for my seniors who are thinking about what comes next after graduation. The poem consists of four sentences, so the length for the task is perfect. We read the first sentence together so students would have some type of context for the poem.

Scan the QR code to read Ruth Moose's poem "The Crossing."

qrs.ly/avgayak

Ruth Moose's 'The Crossing" brings this image to mind.

iStock.com/farbenrausch

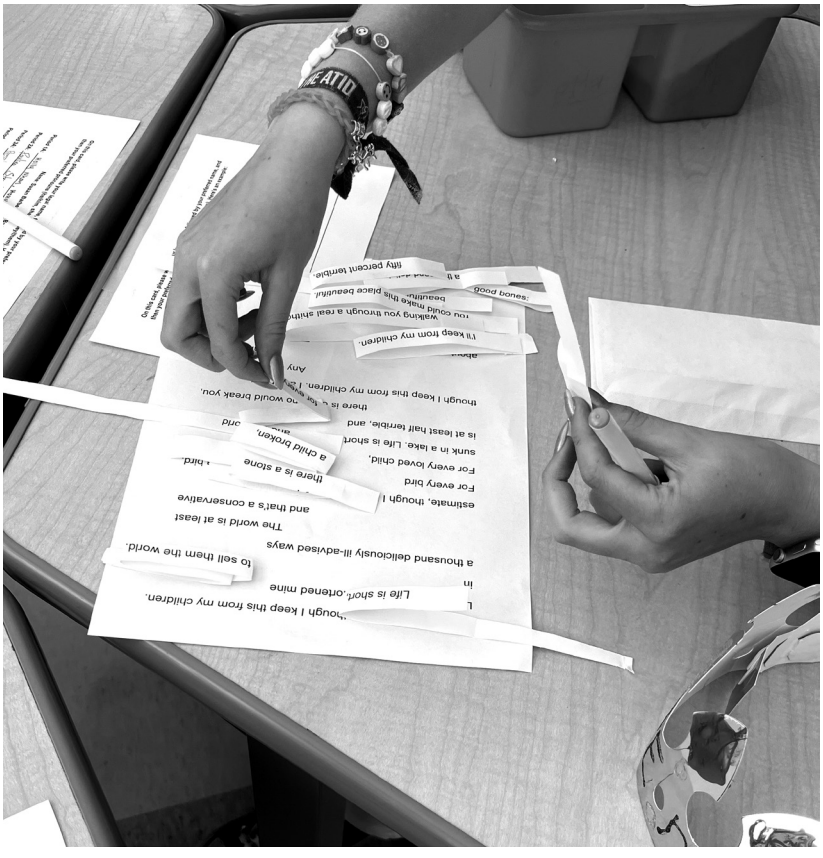
Then I gave student groups individually cut words for the next three sentences in three separate baggies. The goal was twofold: Students construct individual sentences, then determine the order of the sentences. Hearing the students talk about the poem as they were putting it together was music to an English teacher's ears. After students checked themselves, I gave them a few minutes to discuss the poem before answering the following reflection questions in their journal:

- What burdens you?
- Who are you?
- What do you own?
- What have you been given?
- What is calling you to the other side?

This lesson has evolved over time and become my standard first-day lesson typically using Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.b). I love using poem puzzles on the first day for several reasons: We dive into a text-based lesson on day one, and students are reading closely without me forcing it on them, working together to make meaning of a text, discussing, and having fun. This lesson never falls flat, and I've often wondered what makes this lesson so engaging. The puzzle element is a big piece of this: Students have a common goal of solving the puzzle and like racing against other groups. Students are also caught off guard on day one expecting to go over the syllabus and class rules but instead are engaging with content, which is a pleasant surprise.

Scan the QR code to read Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones."

qrs.ly/3qgayay



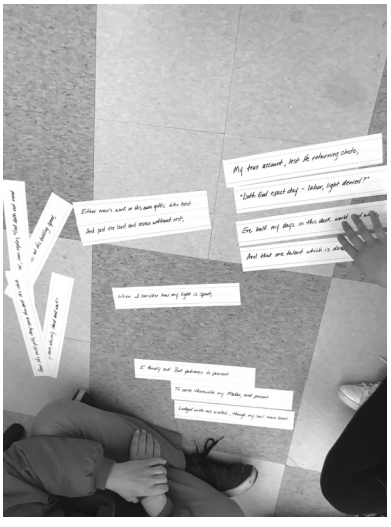
I decided to build in some annotation since students were invested in the poem. We used a tricolor annotation system where one student makes notes in one color, passes the poem to another student who either responds to their peer's notes or makes new notes based on further understanding in a second color, and the poem is passed one more time with the final student making notes in a third color. This strategy reinforces the concept that different readers enter a poem at different places and come away with different ideas. This is perfectly acceptable as there is not one right answer. Students are also able to see the way other students annotate and realize there is not one right way to mark a text.

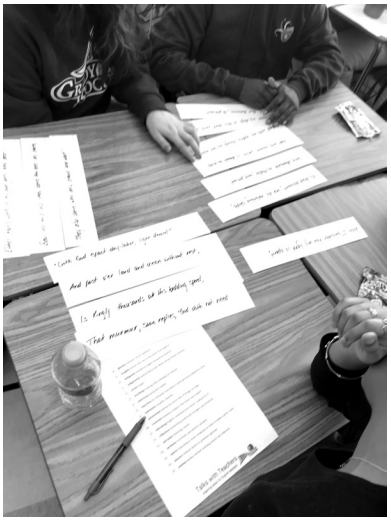
Variations

To adapt the lesson to suit the unit you're teaching and the needs of your students, consider the following variations.

- Consider using sonnet strips as a way to reinforce structure in a sonnet unit. After teaching the structure of sonnets, have students construct the sonnets divided into 14 strips with one line per strip. I typically write an Italian sonnet on one side

in one color and an Elizabethan sonnet on the other side in a different color. Students must use their knowledge of sonnet construction and close reading skills to put the poems together. This reinforces the importance of sonnet structure and how the understanding of it can aid in unpacking the meaning.





- Poems that are written in couplets can easily be divided into two groupings of lines—the first line of the couplet and the second line of the couplet. Students work to put the couplet lines together and in order.
- Class discussion can be built around how the order of stanzas adds to the overall meaning of the poem.
- Have students record themselves reading the poem in a way that reflects their interpretation. Students may share their recordings in small groups.

The Lesson Plan

Time

90-minute block, but can be divided into two separate days of 45 minutes

Materials

Slide deck with words/phrases from poem, set of cut-out words/phrases from poem, copy of poem with words/phrases removed, colored pens

This lesson uses "Good Bones" by Maggie Smith as a specific example, but any poem can be substituted. Sample materials, including words/phrases to cut out and a copy of the poem "Good Bones" with words/phrases removed, are available on the book's companion website.

Scan the QR code to access the sample materials for this lesson.

qrs.ly/aagayb1

Opening Activity

- Project a slide with the words/phrases from the poem you will be using. The words/phrases in Figure 1.1 are from "Good Bones."
- Students choose a word or phrase from the slide and say it as we go around the room.
- Go around the room again choosing a different word/phrase to say.
- Finally, using either the first or second phrase, students say their word/phrase in a tone or expression that best reflects its connotation.

Figure 1.1 Slide With the Words/Phrases From "Good Bones"

for every kind	there is a stone
stranger	fifty percent terrible
and the world	walking you through a real shithole
I'll keep from my children	good bones
a child broken	to sell them the world
Life is short	beautiful
You could make this place beautiful	a thousand delicious

Main Activity

- Provide students with the cut-out words/phrases from "Good Bones" students have been playing with already. Have students working in groups place the words/phrases in the poem where they think they belong.

- Once most students have completed the puzzle, pass out copies of "Good Bones" by Maggie Smith.
- Read the poem chorally as a class.
- Have students annotate the poem. I typically set a timer for 5 minutes to read and mark.
- Have students pass their annotated poem to a peer, then read and mark in another color building on the set of prior annotations. We typically pass twice so students can build upon each other's thoughts, but adjust to the needs of your class.
- Discuss in small groups, then as a whole class.

Closure

- Show the "Good Bones" motion poem and ask students if this interpretation aligns with their interpretation. Encourage students who disagree to share how they view the poem differently, going back to the poem for support.

Scan the QR code to view the "Good Bones" motion poem by Anais La Rocca (2018).

qrs.ly/58gayb5

How to Get 100% Engagement

Approaching a poem can be intimidating and often cause students to check out. This lesson has a "puzzle" at the center that encourages students to do the opposite. Students participate to solve the puzzle, easily inviting them into the poem and enticing them into a close read. In doing so, students are making meaning from text, while working collaboratively and engaging with a subject that's typically difficult for both students and teachers.

Introduction Letter

LESSON 2

Lesson Learning Objective

This lesson is an easy way to set a welcoming tone for the class, learn about students, and introduce them to a few poems at the beginning of the year.

Background

Karla Hillard, a high school teacher from West Virginia, first got me thinking about the idea of using letters in class. After her brother suddenly passed away, she shared a letter with her students that included several poems that met her in her grief. She asked students to respond back to her. I love that when words failed her, she turned to students and poetry in a difficult season and penned a letter when speaking was hard.

I could not shake the idea of writing a letter to students, and I decided to adapt this assignment to an introduction letter. What better way to meet my students than through some good old-fashioned letter writing? In 2019, I sat down and penned (well, typed) my first beginning-of-the-year introduction letter.

Susan Barber

Susan

From Inspiration to Reality in Susan's Classroom

What I love about this assignment is it's rooted in relationship, a strong tenet in my classroom. By writing the letter, I'm also modeling several things I value: one-to-one communication, nonacademic and informal writing, sharing thoughts on poetry, and an invitation to share anything else the student desires.

The lesson is as easy as it sounds. Write a letter to your students at the beginning of the year, then ask them to read it and write a letter to you in return. I love that I get to share some of my life with my students, setting the tone that this will be a safe place for sharing. In my letter, I

highlight three poems that I love and ask students to share some of their thoughts on one of them; this is a nonthreatening way to start discussion on literature.

Here's my introduction letter from this past year:

> Hello, Class of 2025. Welcome!
>
> This year is significant as you start your transition to life after high school, and I count it as a privilege to share this time with you. My hope is that this class will go far beyond the required standards required by the state of Georgia, but instead become a place where we cheer each other on to finish strong and make the most of your senior year.
>
> We will spend a lot of time in this class reading a variety of texts—old, new, poetry, prose—and writing about these texts. The reading and writing are secondary to the most important work that we will be doing all year—learning how to become better thinkers and considering new ideas that will help us grow. I use first-person pronouns here because I, like you, will be growing and learning alongside you and often from you. By opening our hearts to poetry and prose and our minds to new ideas found in them or other classmates' thoughts about them, we will finish the year differently than how we began. This is the real goal of education.
>
> We continue to live and go to school in interesting times. This has caused me to rethink my grading practices, specifically assignments that reward compliance as opposed to assignments that facilitate exploration and thinking and the use of technology (or overuse), specifically how ChatGPT will shift writing instruction. I would ask that you open your mind to new ideas as well and think about how you best learn and stay engaged; we will discuss these topics the first week of school.
>
> What should you know about me? I'm an eternal optimist, I love the written word, and I'm passionate about teaching and the next generation (that's you). This is my seventh year at Grady/Midtown after teaching for a decade in the suburbs. I'm an active reader (you can follow my Goodreads account) and an active writer with a professional website, MuchAdoAbout Teaching.com, which provides resources for English teachers literally across the world. I work part-time for the College Board as a consultant and serve on the test development committee (yes, I help write the exam, and no, I won't tell you what's on it). On the weekends, I'll be in Piedmont Park with my family

and Freddie (my beagle), trying new restaurants (I'm a foodie—any recs?), or cheering on the Crimson Tide. You can find me on Twitter and Instagram (@susangbarber) or catching up with friends at a local coffee shop.

Now it's your turn. I would like for you to write a letter to me telling me about you, but like most things in life, there's a twist. Here are three of my favorite poems: "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver (Library of Congress, n.d.), "Perhaps the World Ends Here" by Joy Harjo (Poetry Foundation, n.d.j), and "How to Triumph Like a Girl" by Ada Limón (see Limón, 2015, p. 3). Read and think about these poems deeply; let them roll around in your mind and your soul. Then write your letter introducing yourself to me; include your thoughts on *one* of these poems. Remember: "It's not what you look at that matters; it's what you see."

You can turn your letters in on Schoology anytime the first full week of school. If you prefer to handwrite, feel free to do that as well. Also if you're submitting electronically and don't mind, would you please include a picture of yourself so I can learn your name and face faster? I am looking forward to learning with you this year!

Cheering you on,

Susan Barber

I am always blown away with how much students share with me at the beginning of the year. Many students share their accomplishments and struggles, expectations and anxieties for the year, and varying degrees of information about themselves. Many students have never been asked by a teacher to write a letter.

This also gives me an idea of students' writing abilities as well as their thinking on literature. In the past, I have used the following poems:

- "Good Bones" by Maggie Smith (Poetry Foundation, n.d.b)
- "If—" by Rudyard Kipling (Poetry Foundation, n.d.e)
- "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver (Library of Congress, n.d.)
- "Instructions on Not Giving Up" by Ada Limón (Academy of American Poets, n.d.e)
- "For Julia, In the Deep Water" by John Norris (Halley, 2009)
- "The Orange" by Wendy Cope (2024)

Variations

To adapt the lesson to best fit your class, consider the following variations.

- If students are reluctant to share personal information, they may share their experiences in previous English classes and/or hopes for the coming year in English.
- To use this lesson late in the year, write an end-of-the-year letter to students reflecting on your time spent with them and asking them to write back reflecting on their time in class and/or the school year.
- Have students create a blackout poem at the end of the year from their beginning-of-the-year introduction letter.
- Instead of responding to a poem, students can suggest three of their favorite poems for me to read.

The Lesson Plan

Time

Approximately 1 hour

Materials

Your writing implement or platform of choice. This can be done either electronically or by hand.

Opening Activity

- Write a letter to your students. The content can vary depending on the time of year or the desired goals, but the letter should include two to three poems for student reflection.

Main Activity

- Share your letter with students.
- Ask students to write a response. Be clear in expectations for students' reply: Should they handwrite? Type? How long should the letter be? What do you expect them to do with the poem?
- Comment on each letter highlighting a specific detail or insight. I try to make at least one comment on an aspect of their personal life and a comment on their poem reflection.

Closure

- After letters have been submitted, count how many students chose which poem to comment on. Share those data with the class along with general observations about the class as a whole and what you learned from them.
- Another closure activity could be to read and discuss the three poems referenced in the letter in class.

How to Get 100% Engagement

Students are rarely asked to introduce themselves to their teacher. A letter is personal and an invitation from the teacher to enter not just a class but a relationship; many students are just waiting on someone to ask them to introduce themselves. The letter format also is less intimidating than speaking up and sharing in class. Finally, choosing poems that are engaging for students to read and appropriate for their reading level helps invite students into a conversation.

The Punctuation Challenge

LESSON 3

Lesson Learning Objective

Students will understand how to use punctuation as a tool to group words together for reader understanding as well as how the use of punctuation affects interpretation of poetry.

Background

My graduate research focused on holistic grammar, and while I am a firm believer in teaching grammar in context, finding specific ways to do this remained a struggle. For me, the teaching of grammar has always been not an end in itself but rather a component of helping students develop a personal style and voice in writing as well as a way into understanding a text. Style is one of the hardest concepts to teach students when they're writing. The idea of playing with sentences and experimenting with style is foreign to so many students—and to teachers.

So why is this writing lesson in a poetry section? When I came across Roy Peter Clark's punctuation symbols in *Writing Tools* (2006), I had an epiphany that the best way to teach punctuation, syntax, and style could be by giving students opportunities to think about the function of punctuation, while reading texts from class.

Clark (2006) writes, "If a period is a stop sign, then what kind of traffic flow is created by other marks? The comma is a speed bump; the semicolon is what a driver education teacher calls a 'rolling stop'; the parenthetical expression is a detour; the colon is a flashing yellow light that announces something important up ahead; the dash is a tree branch in the road" (p. 36). I created Figure 3.1 to start the conversation with students and for students to use as a reference in their own writing.

Figure 3.1 Chart Based on Roy Peter Clark's Analogy of Punctuation and Road Signs in His Book *Writing Tools* (2006)

Period	.	Stop Sign
Comma	,	Speed Bump
Semicolon	;	Rolling Stop
Colon	:	Flashing Yellow Light
Dash	—	Branch in the Road

This chart pictured in Figure 3.1 becomes the backbone of the lesson, providing students a tool to rethink the use of punctuation. I challenge students to rethink punctuation as a way to group words together rather than rules to follow and the effect this has on their reader. Does the author want the information to be a complete thought with the reader fully stopping to consider the idea before moving on? Or does the author want to connect two ideas and slow the reader down—much like a speed bump—between the ideas? A writer can choose to slow readers down even more using a semicolon by connecting two ideas and allowing the reader to almost come to a full stop between them. Writers can also draw attention to their ideas by using a colon or em dash signaling that something out of the ordinary is ahead. These explanations allow students a new way to think about punctuation, moving them from trying to remember what rules to follow and instead empowering them as writers. Writers are in control of the way the reader ingests their information, and the way words are grouped together has a direct effect on the way readers make meaning in a text.

The crux of the lesson is centered on removing punctuation from an excerpt and considering different ways words can be grouped, the punctuation used in the grouping, and the effect this has on our reading of the passage. This strategy forces a close reading of the text in a nontraditional way and allows students to think like a writer while still building their own interpretation of the text. This activity also allows for a strong transference of skill from reading to writing, and the punctuation–road sign analogy is one we return to throughout the year.

Susan Barber

Susan

From Inspiration to Reality in Susan's Classroom

Removing punctuation is as simple as it sounds. I choose a text, usually one we're working with in class, and narrow it down to an excerpt for focus. Next I remove all punctuation from the selected passage. Also, I

typically change capital letters to lowercase letters in order to not give away punctuation clues.

When the passage is set, I introduce students to Clark's (2006) analogy of punctuation and road signs by showing Figure 3.1 and discussing each parallel.

I have found students are eager to talk about their driving experiences and the difference between slowing down for a speed bump versus coming to a rolling stop. I confess to making contributions to the city where we live for rolling stops or to upsetting family members when I don't slow down enough at a speed bump. We laugh at driving, but we're really processing punctuation and how to use it.

Next we look at the chosen excerpt. This passage is from *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver (1999, p. 1):

> Listen being dead is not worse than being alive it's just different
> though you could say the view is larger

I ask students to copy it in their writer's notebook and add punctuation based on our prior conversation. I challenge students to rethink their paradigm of following punctuation rules and instead think of using punctuation as a way of grouping words together.

After a few minutes of work, I instruct students to share their choices in small groups, explaining to their peers why they chose each punctuation mark and why they chose to group words in the way they did. Most students will have made different choices. I ask them to consider how their choices change the meaning of the passage in both big and small ways. This is the heart of the lesson and where the magic happens. Students are now talking about the function and purpose of punctuation and how it can be used to help build an interpretation in a text.

I then show them how Kingsolver (1999) used punctuation in the excerpt.

> Listen: being dead is not worse than being alive. It is different
> though. You could say the view is larger.

Students are now prompted to discuss why she made these moves as a writer and how these choices alter their interpretation. If the student chose different punctuation and/or placement, does that make them wrong? Of course not; that realization leads to a good discussion of how punctuation can be used to alter meaning or tone and add to personal style. When students understand that punctuation can be used to group words for clarity, speed up or slow down the reader, or contribute to the meaning of the text, they will be equipped as readers to use punctuation to help make meaning in a text and as writers to use it as stylistic choices.

Variations

To adapt or extend this lesson, consider the following variations.

- Encourage students to play with punctuation in their own writing. I ask students to try something new with either punctuation or syntax (usually both) in each piece of writing. Then we talk about how trying something different is like trying on clothes. There are some outfits that I know work for me: wrap dresses, jumpsuits, and Alabama football jerseys. I can go to these over and over without thinking, knowing I wear them confidently and they reflect me. There are, however, other items that I don't know whether they work or not until I try them on: vests, off-the-shoulder shirts, and skinny jeans (yes, yes, and no). But I keep trying things and adding more things that work to my closet so that I can pull them out and wear them when appropriate. The same is true with writing. Students need to try different things to see if it fits with their voice and style. I have my students bracket sentences where they are experimenting, signaling me to provide feedback on whether this works or not for them. They can also come back quickly to the bracketed sentence for reflection. And I never—*never*—penalize students with a bad grade if they are experimenting with style.
- Use this strategy to introduce syntax and tone by providing students with a copy of "This Is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams (Poetry Foundation, n.d.m) and have them add punctuation. This poem has no punctuation in it (a fun reveal), and the punctuation students insert in their experimentation really alters interpretations.
- Study punctuation as a reader and not just a writer. Circle punctuation in passages with complicated syntax and use it as clues to determine meaning. When students understand that punctuation can be their guide to understanding, comprehension, and making meaning, dense and complicated texts can unfold before their eyes.
- Play with punctuation literally. Make flash cards with punctuation marks for students to manipulate with sentence strips. Kinesthetic learning is highly underrated.

The Lesson Plan

Time

20–60 minutes depending on the excerpt or poem

Materials

Paper (my students use their writer's notebooks), slide of Clark's (2006) punctuation marks and road sign chart (Figure 3.1), excerpt with punctuation removed

Visit the book's companion website to download a slide of the chart.

qrs.ly/v4gayb6

Opening Activity

- Review Clark's (2006) punctuation marks and road sign chart (Figure 3.1).
- Project or pass out to students a copy of the excerpt/poem with punctuation removed.

Main Activity

- Students add punctuation to the passage.
- Students share their choices in small groups, explaining why they chose a particular punctuation mark, why they chose to group words together, and the effect of their choices.
- Share the author or poet's punctuation of the excerpt.
- Students discuss the original choices, how these choices affect meaning, and the differences in their choices and meaning.

Closure

- Review the concept of punctuation as a tool of grouping words together, instead of rules to be followed. Highlight that punctuation influences how readers build interpretations of a passage.

How to Get 100% Engagement

Students participate in this lesson because it takes a concept that has traditionally been taught by rote memory and draws a parallel with a concept that is relatable to students. Reluctant participants are encouraged to participate when they realize there is "no wrong answer" as long as their choices can be defended. The experimentation of placing different punctuation marks in different locations puts the student in control of making decisions as opposed to recalling rules. Students are engaged in "defending" their choice and also like hearing the choices of other students.

Think Like a Poet

LESSON 4

Lesson Learning Objective

In this lesson, students will hear words from a classic poem recited orally. They will then work collaboratively and creatively to format those words into a poem, structuring it so that form follows function.

Background

It was my second year at Miller Place High School, just my fifth year of teaching overall, and I was taking over for everyone's favorite English teacher. Mr. Newcombe taught for 30 years. His aura loomed large as he had won awards and completed a fellowship with the National Endowment for the Humanities. As he would often tell me, "If you cut me, I bleed English."

I was assigned to teach his advanced courses, and I did not want to let his students down, especially on the first day. I wanted to make an impression; going over the syllabus and lecturing about course expectations just wasn't going to cut it.

I needed a way to show these senior students who I was, what the course would be about, and how we—together—could use literature to achieve something remarkable during the year.

I turned to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.o), which I first read in my early 20s. Then, and to this day, the poem's words fill me with a fire to lead a life of purpose. It has taught me to be a thinker and "follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought." It has warned me of the dangers of being passive: "How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!" It has also encouraged me to never let a weakness cripple my will to achieve: "That which we are, we are; / One equal temper of heroic hearts, / Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will."

Time and time again I have returned to it, and its inspiration never disappoints. I hoped, in turn, to use it to inspire my students on that first day.

Scan the QR code to read Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "Ulysses."

qrs.ly/z5gaybb

At 70 lines, it was too daunting for students to conquer in one 42-minute period. But there were 18 lines (see excerpt that follows) that would speak directly to them, as seniors, about to embark on one last adventure.

I didn't want to be the typical teacher in any way. I didn't want to give them the poem, ask them to read it, and answer some questions. They deserved better of me.

I wanted them to experience the poem like they never had experienced one before. I wanted them to think like a poet, write like a poet, and talk like a poet. In doing so, they would read closely and analytically, although they wouldn't even realize they were doing it because I wanted them so engrossed in what they were doing.

The idea first came from Larry Scanlon, a mentor who filled me with confidence and ideas in his weeklong summer institute I had attended just weeks before. I was going to use his Poetry Out Loud idea that would enable my students to become poets, not just readers of poetry.

This has been my first-day lesson ever since.

Brian Sztabnik
Brian

From Inspiration to Reality in Brian's Classroom

I don't take attendance; I don't introduce myself; I don't ask students to check and make sure they are in the right room. I tell them to take out their notebooks and copy down what I am about to say. I begin with this recitation of "Ulysses" (which really turns into an invitation once you reach the "Come, my friends" part) that I've committed to memory:

> There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
>
> There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
>
> Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
>
> That ever with a frolic welcome took
>
> The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
>
> Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
>
> Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
>
> Death closes all: but something ere the end,
>
> Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
>
> Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
>
> The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:

The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep

Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

Push off, and sitting well in order smite

The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds

To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths

Of all the western stars, until I die.

Before I recite it again, I tell them this second opportunity is a chance to fill in some of the gaps they have, which are substantial because no one gets it all the first time. I recite it again for a third time, hoping that they have 80%–90% of it.

I then tell them to find a partner and to work together. Their first task is to compare notes and agree on all the words. Their second task is to stop being students and start thinking like poets. I ask, "If you were the poet, how would you have composed those lines? Where would the breaks be? Would it be one stanza or multiple stanzas?" They have to turn the words into a poem, making decisions about structure and format.

Students are invigorated by the challenge. They get to shape this how they see fit. Some break the lines into five stanzas. Some pick up on my natural pauses while reciting and break lines there. After a few have given me their finished copy, I read them and give some encouragement. Then, I finally put the excerpt on the SMART Board so they can see how close they came.

Finally, I ask, "So what is this all about? Who is this guy speaking to in the poem?"

Students pick up on the nautical diction. They see images of an end approaching ("The long day wanes"; "'Tis not too late"). We begin to ask questions of the speaker—who is he, and what does he want? A productive discussion ensues. Then the invitation comes into play. "Come, my friends, / 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world." I tell them that, yes, this is your senior year. This is the end of the ride. You can just mail it in and get a diploma. But something great can still happen—"Some work of noble note, may yet be done"—in this class.

I seek to inspire them to be explorers of wisdom and learning. We look back to the excerpt and see what else we can find of this speaker. What qualities does he display? What techniques does the poet use to make meaning?

When the smoke clears, I tell them that this is just a piece of a larger poem. Their homework for the night is to find that larger piece, annotate the heck out of it, and be prepared to have our first Socratic Seminar the next day on it.

Variations

To adapt this lesson to the unit you're teaching and the needs of your students, consider the following variations.

- This lesson can work well with any short, inspiring part of a poem.
- You can make the outcome of this lesson competitive or creative depending on how you approach the main activity. If you want to make it competitive, see how close students come to the actual poem, all the way down to the punctuation. If you want to make it creative, have students look at the difference between their structure and the actual poem's structure and decide which they like better.
- I prefer to memorize and recite lines because I believe that it has a greater dramatic presence, but you could play an audio recording of a poem.
- You could also use this approach with the opening paragraph of a novel. I think something like *The Great Gatsby* would work well.

The Lesson Plan

Time

45 minutes

Materials

Paper, pen or pencil

Opening Activity

- Have each student take out a piece of paper and a pen.
- Inform the students that you will recite something and they must copy it down to the best of their ability.
- Let the students know that they won't get it all the first time, but they need not worry because you will recite it three times.
- Recite the 18 lines, pausing for a few minutes in between each recitation. During those in-between moments, ask students questions like "How many of you feel that you have 25% of what I said? 50%? 75%?"

Main Activity

- After the three recitations, have students work in pairs to
  - Make sure they agree on the words
  - Re-create the words into poetic structure
  - Decide on line breaks and stanza breaks
- Challenge them to think like poets. If this was their poem, how would they structure it? Is it one stanza or multiple stanzas? Where do the lines break, and why?
- You can make it competitive and see which pair of students can come the closest to the original poem. You can do this by periodically dropping hints every few minutes like "This is 18 lines long," "It is one stanza," or "It is written in iambic pentameter."
- You can also make it creative by not dropping any hints and letting students develop their own structure to the poem, ultimately allowing them to compare their choices to the original when you reveal the 18 lines.

Closure

- Reveal the 18 lines on the board and give students a few moments to make comparisons.
- Start examining the words and lines, helping students build an interpretation of the section.
- Ask students why we would study these 18 lines on the first day of school.
- Make the connection between the speaker of the poem and their lives.

How to Get 100% Engagement

In all the years I have done this lesson, I have yet to have a student not write when I begin my recitation of the 18 lines. Sure, some have had to borrow a pen or some paper, but they all write something.

This lesson is magical because students see poetry from the other side. They see it not as an abstract thing that they are being forced to read; they finally experience it as a poet does. They must make choices that help shape meaning.

This excerpt also focuses their attention on the possibility for something remarkable before the year is done. It encourages a deep conviction for some worthy pursuit, to believe in the nobility of work, and to assume an adventurous spirit in pursuit of something beyond expectation.

Literary CSI

LESSON 5

Lesson Learning Objective

In this lesson, students will view four poems, three of which are written by the same poet, while one is not. Looking at a poet's unique writing style as if it were DNA, students will assume the role of literary forensic investigator and determine which poem is not like the others.

Background

Did you know that even though we all use the same language, no two people write in the same precise manner? We each have our own tendencies, quirks, peculiarities, and flairs, creating our own unique literary DNA.

This is the heart of Vassar College professor Don Foster's book, *Author Unknown* (2000). Foster believes our writing style is like our fingerprint. He gained attention when he tied a previously unattributed poem back to Shakespeare. He also participated in analyzing the Unabomber's writing and was able to tie its quirks back to Ted Kaczynski's previous works.

Foster is one of the forefathers of the field of literary forensics.

While the FBI has sought the services of forensic linguists like Foster for high-profile cases, I have used his methods in the classroom to get students to think about a poet's DNA—looking at their style, thematic focus, and perhaps even literary period.

The whole concept rests on students knowing the poetic form a poet preferred, how they liked their rhyme schemes, the types of punctuation that dominated their poems, and what subjects occupied the bulk of their poetic works.

The simple premise of the lesson is to give students four poems—three of which are by the same poet, while one is not. Their job is to play detective and figure out the odd one out.

I've done this with Shakespeare when studying sonnets, and I've done it in a Romantic poetry unit, giving students three poems by William Wordsworth and one modern poem about nature.

What makes it so much fun is that poetry is no longer about a dreaded excavation of similes and metaphors. Instead, it becomes an exciting whodunit mystery waiting to be solved.

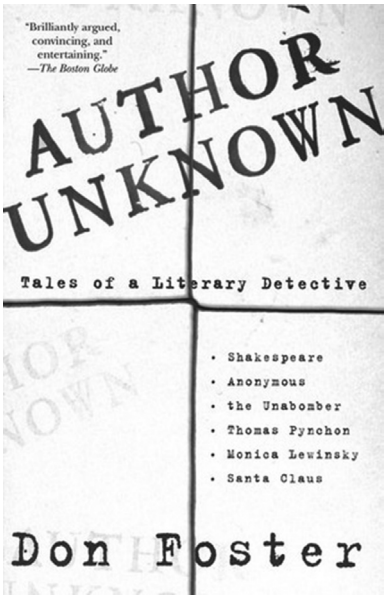
Brian Sztabnik
Brian

From Inspiration to Reality in Brian's Classroom

This works best at the end of a unit as a culminating activity in which students can display all their accumulated knowledge.

I start by doing a quick review in which I am peppering the students with rapid-response questions. When I did this as a culminating Shakespearean sonnet unit, these were the things I wanted to review:

- How many lines are in a sonnet?
- How many sonnets did Shakespeare write?
- How many syllables are in each line of a sonnet?
- What is an octave?
- What is a sestet?
- What is a quatrain?
- What is a volta?
- Can you identify one common rhyme scheme for a sonnet?
- What's another popular rhyme scheme for a sonnet?



Once these concepts are reinforced, I have an image of Foster's book on the SMART Board and give them an overview of literary forensics. As I am teaching them its basic concepts, I am always reframing those concepts in the personal, rather than the abstract. I challenge them to self-reflect and think about their own quirks as writers—what makes their style unique. I also encourage them to think about their friends' texting style: Could they identify someone's texts based on their catchphrases, unique spelling, and patterns of language?

Then, as I play the intro music to the hit 2000s TV show *CSI*, I put students into groups of three or four and hand each group a packet of four poems.

I let the students know that all four poems are sonnets, three of which were written by Shakespeare while one was *not*, and it is their job to investigate each of the poems to determine "which one is not like the other."

Students can use the notes they have accumulated throughout the unit, as well as the other Shakespearean sonnets we have studied to compare and contrast.

Circulating the room during their discussions is a delight. Students are analyzing everything from diction, to syntax, to punctuation, to structure, to thematic focus. This is rigorous work for the students, but is not the soul-crushing rigor that turns them off to poetry. It is a quest, a mystery waiting to be solved with all the evidence right there in front of them.

Variations

To make this lesson fit in your instruction, consider the following variations.

- You can do this lesson with any poet, not just Shakespeare. On the middle school level, this lesson works well with three Robert Frost poems ("Mending Wall," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," and "The Road Not Taken"; Poetry Foundation, n.d.k) and one Emily Dickinson poem ("Success is Counted Sweetest"; Poetry Foundation, n.d.l).
- To modernize it on the high school level, I like using three Clint Smith (2020) poems ("Counting Descent" [p. 21], "Playground Elegy" [p. 26], and "When Maze and Frankie Beverly Come on in My House" [p. 30]) and one Elizabeth Acevedo (2016) poem ("For the Poet Who Told Me Rats Aren't Noble Enough Creatures for a Poem").

The Lesson Plan

Time

45 minutes

Materials

The image of *Author Unknown* (Foster, 2000), the *CSI* opening credits (planetcsi, 2009), a packet of four poems (I like to use three from Shakespeare [see Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.]—Sonnet 6 [VI], Sonnet 33 [XXXIII], and Sonnet 104 [CIV]—and Holy Sonnet 14 [XIV] by John Donne [Poetry Foundation, n.d.c])

Opening Activity

- Review foundational terms and concepts about sonnets.
  - How many lines are in a sonnet?
  - How many sonnets did Shakespeare write?
  - How many syllables are in each line of a sonnet?
  - What is an octave?
  - What is a sestet?
  - What is a quatrain?
  - What is a volta?
  - Can you identify one common rhyme scheme for a sonnet?
  - What's another popular rhyme scheme for a sonnet?
- Introduce students to the concepts of literary forensics and the work of Don Foster.
- Have students self-reflect on their own unique writing/texting style.

Main Activity

- Put students into groups of three or four while playing the opening credits to *CSI*.
- Hand each group a packet with four poems. I use these three Shakespearean sonnets: Sonnet 6 (VI), Sonnet 33 (XXXIII), and Sonnet 104 (CIV). I use Holy Sonnet 14 (XIV) by John Donne as the other sonnet. Let all the groups know that everyone has the same packet and their job is to investigate the writing style of each poem and determine the three written by Shakespeare and the one that was not.

- Not only must students submit their answer, but they must provide a written justification for why they believe that one poem they chose was not written by Shakespeare.
- As groups are working, circulate the room and participate in group discussions, giving them feedback and advice.
- Once each group has their answer recorded and justification written, bring the class back for a final debrief.

Closure

- Each group will be called upon to have one representative name the poem that was not written by Shakespeare and read their justification for why another poet wrote that poem.
- The teacher will keep score of the votes on the board.
- When all answers have been submitted, the teacher will reveal the poem that was not written by Shakespeare.

How to Get 100% Engagement

Just as we loved the board game Clue as kids, and as we matured into loving murder-mystery podcasts as adults, we all love participating in solving a puzzle in which we are presented with evidence and have to figure out an answer. Students transform from passive readers of poetry into active investigators of style, structure, and subject. Sometimes they second-guess themselves, overthink it, or straddle both sides of the fence, but in the end what makes everyone participate is their desire to be the one at the end to say, "I told you so!"

Magic Eye Images

LESSON 6

Lesson Learning Objective

In this lesson, students will learn about the patience necessary to appreciate poems by looking at 3D art images.

Background

Do you remember those 3D art images that were all the rage in the ’90s? You know, the ones where, as you stared at them, an image would pop out and blow your mind? When I was a kid, there was a framing store/poster galleria in my local mall, and it must have been in need of foot traffic. It had a rotating lineup of these images in its display window, and a small crowd would always be there to stop and stare.

iStock.com/Gintare Stackunaite

My problem was, no matter how hard I stared, I could never see “it.” Part of the problem was that I was trying too hard. I didn’t realize that I needed to relax my eyes, mind, and focus. I was looking all over the place instead of letting the image come to me.

I thought it just wasn’t in me to see what others saw.

I heard the same frustration from my students when I inevitably began teaching poetry. My poetry haters told me that “it just isn’t my thing,” that they “don’t get it,” and that they “don’t know where to start.”

Hearing this over the years made me think back to my experiences at the mall and empathize with what they were experiencing. I realized that I could be like Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*, who teaches his young apprentice about karate without directly teaching him karate (Piece of the Action, 2021). My students could become better poetry readers by first looking at 3D art. Viewing the images is a metaphor for looking at a poem.

This is my go-to lesson to introduce poetry. It takes all the anxiety and stress out of reading poems and makes the process fun. It teaches students that you don't see everything in a poem all at once. You have to let it come to you in time. It reminds them that if you try too hard, you'll just end up frustrated with yourself and the experience. It encourages students to relax, be patient, and wait for the blurriness of a poem to eventually come into focus—and when it does, you will see depth and dimension.

Brian Sztabnik
Brian

From Inspiration to Reality in Brian's Classroom

As students enter the room, have something really cheesy on the board in big, bold letters, like this:

Who is excited for POETRY?????

I like to ask students about their experience with poetry in the past. Guess what? The most ardent haters never fail to voice their opinion. And to a certain extent, I entertain these opinions because ultimately I want it to set up the epiphany by the end of the lesson that poetry isn't so bad; it is actually fun.

After this slightly cathartic experience in which students can exorcise their poetry demons, I pull out a 3D art image and ask students if they have had any experience looking at something like it.

I confess to students that for years I couldn't see anything, and much to my frustration, it seemed like so many others found it so easy and enjoyable while I languished.

I say with great humility that I was doing it all wrong because I didn't know what to do. I was looking all over the place, often way too hard. Only when I read the directions closely and followed its framework for viewing with relaxed eyes, holding a steady gaze, and gradually moving it away did it become magical.

I read those instructions aloud as they become the next slide on the SMART Board:

> Hold the center of the printed image right up to your nose. It should be blurry. Focus as though you are looking through the image into the distance. Relax your eyes. Very slowly move the image away from your face.
>
> Just as things begin to come into view, the temptation is to blink and focus the image. DON'T! Hold the page still and continue to look through the image. Soon the hidden image will magically appear. Once you perceive the hidden image and depth, you can look around the entire 3D image. The longer you look, the clearer the illusion becomes. The farther away you hold the page, the deeper it becomes.

I then ask the class if they want to try, and that's when this lesson hits 100% engagement. Everyone wants in. So, I take out all the images that I have—about 12–15—and I partner the students up, letting them have fun with it.

Images get passed back and forth, and I let the magic unfold. Some students get it instantly, some take a while, and some struggle to see anything. But those who see have their minds blown. Their eyes work in tandem with their mind to transform a weirdly printed design into something with depth and dimension.

Finally, when the images have circulated throughout the room, I gather them and tell the students that what they did isn't that different from reading a poem.

Poems seem weird at first glance. One reason is that you can't take everything in all at once. You have to start small and look closely with a relaxed mind at a few words and phrases that jump out at you. Soon you will be able to make some inferences about those things and piece them together with other things in the poem. This is typically when a poem takes on depth and dimension rather than something superficial and abstract. Sooner or later, it jumps out at you, and you finally "see" it for the first time.

I then hand out a really good poem—like "Gate A-4" by Naomi Shihab Nye (Academy of American Poets, n.d.c) or "Looking for The Gulf Motel" by Richard Blanco (Academy of American Poets, n.d.f)—and read it aloud twice. Once I have finished reading, I ask them to relax their mind and start looking at the small things that jump out at them, a phrase or a line. I ask them to make inferences about those things. Once they have finished, then can move on to another line or phrase and make another observation, then another. I give them about 5–7 minutes to make more annotations, but I don't tell them that. I don't want their mind to be occupied with the time. I want it to be occupied by the poem.

Once time is up, I show them my list of 50 common subjects in literature and ask them to write down all the ones that apply to the poem. This worksheet is my most-used resource in my classroom because it gives

Scan the QR code to read Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Gate A-4."

qrs.ly/r8gaybd

Scan the QR code to read Richard Blanco's poem "Looking for The Gulf Motel."

qrs.ly/jrgaybj

students a working vocabulary for the ideas they recognize in a poem but often struggle to articulate. Usually they come up with 15–20, which impresses them as well as me. See Lesson 7 for more on the "50 Common Subjects in Literature" resource and how to use it in a lesson.

At this point, they should have a few ideas about the poem, and I want to hear them. I put the poem on the SMART Board and ask the students what they noticed. As they offer their observations, I turn what they say into annotations on the board.

When we are done, there are substantial annotations on the board, and the depth of the poem is exposed for all to see.

Scan the QR code to access the "50 Common Subjects in Literature" resource.

qrs.ly/41gaybl

Variations

To adapt the lesson to your classroom, consider the following variations.

- Looking at 3D art is not the only metaphor for reading a poem. Students can follow an upside-down drawing tutorial on YouTube in which the complete image is not revealed until students flip over the page. The key here is perspective. Sometimes an image can be confusing at first glance, yet when you change perspective, it finally makes sense.
- Read Billy Collins's poem "Introduction to Poetry" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.f) and use the 3D pictures to discuss the seeing versus seeing the image in reading poetry.

The Lesson Plan

Time

45 minutes

Materials

Paper, pencil/pen, ideally one 3D hidden art image per student. MagicEye.com is a great place to get started with images. You can also get a few books or calendars on Amazon that have lots of the 3D hidden art images.

Opening Activity

- Begin the lesson with the word POETRY on the board in big, bold letters.
- Ask students about their experience with poetry in the past. Most will not hold back and will sound off on how unpleasant the experience has been for them.

  Comments typically include statements like these:

  - Poetry is the worst.
  - I just don't get it.
  - Why do they have to put all those similes and metaphors in there?
  - I only like it when it rhymes.
  - Why do they have to make it so difficult? Why can't they just say what they want to say without all the weird language?
- Share your personal story of frustration with 3D art hidden images as an adolescent. If this wasn't a frustration for you, you can tell it as a third-person story. Talk about how that frustration is a natural occurrence when you try things for the first time. Let students know that you too struggled with poetry as an adolescent.

Main Activity

- Distribute 3D images to students sitting in pairs.
- Read the instructions to students and give the pairs time to work with the images, occasionally repeating the directions for reinforcement.
- Over time, allow students to share the images among themselves, letting them enjoy the experience.

- Once the images have circulated throughout the room, gather them and make the connection between the experience the students just shared and the experience of reading a poem.
- Have students return to their original seats, then hand out a really good poem. Read it twice.
- Ask students to find a place in the poem where they can make one inference. Once they have finished, they can move on to another line or phrase and make another inference, then another. Give students 5–7 more minutes to make additional annotations.
- Pass out or display the list of 50 common subjects in literature and ask students to make a list of all the ones that apply to the poem.
- Put the poem on the SMART Board and ask the students what they noticed.
- As students provide their inferences or subjects, make the annotations on the SMART Board that they offer.
- Do this repeatedly, until there are substantial annotations on the board and the depth of the poem is exposed for all to see.

Closure

- Make the point to all students that reading and understanding a poem, much like looking at a 3D image, is a gradual process. Not everything jumps out at you at once. Patience is required. So is an open mind. Students need these two qualities to allow bits of the poem to work its magic on them.

How to Get 100% Engagement

There is a gravitational pull to the 3D art images. Once I start passing them around, a natural fascination to see gets everyone involved. Be prepared because there will be frustration expressed by students who don't see anything. It is understandable. There is a sense of FOMO when others are experiencing something they are not. This is a teachable moment. I empathize with those students and tell them that there are poems that I still struggle to understand. I focus on their willingness to try, and that is something I make explicit to the entire class. Just like complex mathematics problems or scientific inquiries, answers don't always offer themselves readily. It takes time, thought, and patience. Students then are more willing to apply the same techniques to reading a poem when we begin our analysis.

Poetry Speed Dating

LESSON 7

Lesson Learning Objective

Students will learn from each other as they participate in a fun and fast way to share annotations.

Background

Before online dating apps, speed dating had a moment. It was the original swipe right. It allowed singles to meet many people in a short amount of time, making it much more efficient than traditional dating. Prior to speed dating, you had to go to a bar or club and muster the courage to talk to someone. At a speed-dating event, participants were given a limited amount of time—say 5–10 minutes—to interact with each potential partner, creating a micro date. In that time, you would get a sense if there was any chemistry, or if the person was a dud. Whether the speed date was a success or a flop, you would then move on to the next person. By the end of an evening, after going on 15–20 micro dates, you would leave with a list of potential partners that you might want to see again, as well numerous ones that you wanted to leave behind.

It allowed singles to broaden their connections quickly and efficiently. It limited long awkward pauses because you often had a list of conversation generators. It allowed you to showcase your best self in a short, face-to-face interaction.

This framework is also a fun way to think about how we can get our students to collaborate on their annotations. One of my frustrations in a traditional lesson is that it is terribly inefficient to call on one student at a time to share an annotation or insight. While one student shares, the rest of the class listens.

So why not increase the contact time for everyone and increase the outcomes?

Brian Sztabnik
Brian

From Inspiration to Reality in Brian's Classroom

I love the framework L.I.T. for analyzing and annotating poems. L.I.T. stands for Literal, Inferences, Thematic. It is easy to remember. It scaffolds knowledge, allowing students to understand a poem on a superficial level first, then progress to a deeper level. And it doesn't overwhelm students with a million steps, making it pretty simple to draw some conclusions about the poem.

I use it all the time with poetry.

To use the L.I.T. framework, students write the three letters of the acronym going down the right-hand margin of the poem (since many poems are flush left). After two readings of the poem—one by me and one by a student—students will fill in the annotations for each letter. Each step is described here.

L: Literal

In two sentences, students summarize what is *literally* happening in the poem. Don't go looking for similes and metaphors. Don't go digging for poetic devices. Just tell me what happens. Students often rush to make abstract inferences about poems. The first step is to understand what happens on a very basic level. A good sentence starter for this is *In this poem, the speaker is* _____.

I: Inferences

Once students have established the literal, then they can begin to unpack what the poem is *suggesting* without having said it literally. They can look for moments where the poem *implies* something but it is not explicit. They can find moments to piece together bits of information and determine what is *implied*. Students can see the poem *hinting at* an idea or concept, but they have to articulate it because it exists beneath the surface. Examples of inferences could be a shift in tone or the connotation of a word or phrase; it could be recognizing something about the structure of a poem or unpacking a simile. Inferences basically answer a question: *Why is this in the poem?* I challenge my students to make 7–10 inferences.

T: Thematic

Finally, students consider the theme. I share a list with 50 common subjects in literature (see Table 7.1). It is my most-used resource throughout the year. Students scan through the list and pick out four that apply to the poem.

Table 7.1 50 Common Subjects in Literature

1. Abandonment	26. Isolation
2. Alienation	27. Justice
3. Ambition	28. Love
4. The American Dream	29. Memory
5. Birth/Childhood/New Life	30. Nationalism
6. Coming of Age	31. Nature
7. Business/Commercialism	32. Oppression
8. Community	33. Parenthood
9. Cruelty	34. Pride
10. Death	35. Race/Racism
11. Education/Learning	36. Regret
12. Ethics	37. Rejection
13. Family	38. Religion
14. Fate	39. Responsibility
15. Freedom	40. Science and Technology
16. Futility	41. Sex/Sensuality/Eroticism
17. Gender	42. Social Class
18. Grief	43. Spirituality
19. Guilt/Shame	44. Stages of Life
20. Heroism	45. Success
21. Hope	46. Suffering
22. The Need/Search for Identity	47. Survival
23. Illness	48. Tradition
24. Individual and Society	49. Violence
25. Innocence and Experience	50. Work

Scan the QR code to download the "50 Common Subjects in Literature" resource.

qrs.ly/cpgaybn

I give students roughly 10 minutes to complete the three steps. Once the 10 minutes have expired, I ask them to turn their page over.

I tell them that I want them to know about the origin story of speed dating and give an overview. It must be an awkward mental transition to go from annotations to hearing the history of speed dating, but that is the point. I want students to wonder where I am going with all this.

Once I have recounted the backstory of speed dating, I ask for one student volunteer to come to the front of the room. In the front of the room, I have two chairs set up, one for me and one for the student. When the student is in the act of sitting down, I tell that student that we are going to go on a poetry speed date as I extend my hand. I introduce myself, totally hamming up the moment.

Then I say, "Let me tell you a little about myself. I noticed that . . . ," and I go to my annotations and pick out one inference to share. I unpack my inference, telling my "date" where it occurs in the poem, what I noticed about it, and why it may be important to the poem as a whole.

I ask my "date" to share a little about themself by telling me one thing they noticed in the poem. As the student walks me through their annotation, I record their inference on my poem, increasing my understanding of the poem. As the "date" comes to an end, I lean into the cheesiness of the moment. I'll say something like, "We definitely had annotation chemistry," or "Great minds think alike. We should do this again sometime soon."

As the student returns to their seat, I tell the class that I just modeled what they are about to do because they are going to go on a series of speed dates that will last only 2–3 minutes. In that time, they will

1. Introduce themselves
2. Share an inference
3. Copy down their partner's insight
4. Find a cheesy way to close the annotation date

They then turn to a partner and go on their first date, and we are off! I'm the timekeeper, keeping dates to a 2–3-minute minimum, and they are hamming it up as they share their annotations.

As they go on seven or eight dates, they are smiling, laughing, and assuming a persona that allows them to talk about poetry in a risk-free environment. Sharing ideas about poems has never been so much fun!

Variations

To keep your students engaged and fit the lesson to your unit, consider the following variations.

- I always find fun ways to decide who stays at the desk and who moves on to the next date. I say things such as "The younger person gets to stay, and the older person moves on to a new date." Or, "The person with bigger feet gets to stay, and the person with smaller feet has to put them to use and move." I even have them play Rock-Paper-Scissors to determine who stays and who goes.

- While speed dating works well with poems, it is not exclusive to that genre. I have done this activity with any text I want my students to read closely—a page of a novel, a section of a short story, even nonfiction texts like speeches.
- Instead of dates, students can work in small groups and create a three-course meal using the L.I.T. annotation framework. The literal observations are the appetizers, the inferences are the main course, and the thematic statements are the dessert.

The Lesson Plan

Time

45 minutes

Materials

Copies of a poem, pencil or pen

Opening Activity

- Begin the lesson by reviewing the L.I.T. framework for annotating poems.
- Hand out a poem and ask students to annotate it using the L.I.T. framework.
- Give students a history lesson about speed dating.

Main Activity

- Ask for a volunteer to come up to the room.
- Model a speed date in front of the class, one that is based on annotations.
- Tell students to turn to a partner to go on their first speed date.
- Rotate dates every 3 minutes. Sometimes I have students play Rock-Paper-Scissors to move on. Sometimes the taller partner moves on. And so on.
- Have students go on seven or eight dates.
- After the last date, have students return to their seats, and call on students to share some of the insights they picked up from their dates. Annotate it on the poem, which is projected onto the SMART Board.

Closure

- As a class, go back to the list of 50 common subjects in literature (Table 7.1), and have a discussion about the prevalent subjects that are addressed in the poem.
- Close the lesson by taking two of those subjects and turning them into themes.

How to Get 100% Engagement

So often with poetry, students are afraid to participate in class because they are not confident in their answers. They think poetry is deep and often see their answers, whether they are or not, as shallow. You are not asking students to put themselves out there intellectually or speak for an extended period of time with this lesson; you are asking them to offer one insight. The great thing about this lesson is that you are creating the conditions for learning to occur, but the students—not you—are the ones who make it happen. There is so much productive energy and noise in the room as the dates transpire, and as a teacher it is so satisfying to soak it all in.

Mastering the Masters Through Satire

LESSON 8

Lesson Learning Objective

Students will understand how to use punctuation as a tool to group words together for reader understanding as well as how the use of punctuation affects interpretation of poetry.

Background

Sometimes when a unit ends with a test or an essay, the lasting impression for students is one of dread and anxiety. The shame of that is that it can ruin the students' learning experience, wiping out all the fun they had along the way. Whenever I'm wrapping up a unit, I do feel it necessary to have some summation of learning, but I also like to include a small, fun project that will allow for a positive outcome as they exit the experience.

For poetry, my favorite final assignment is Mastering the Masters. It is exactly as it sounds.

Students take one of the poems that we have studied in the unit and modernize it with a satirical twist. One year, using William Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.d), a student wrote "Composed Upon a 5 Guys Napkin, February 15, 2018." Instead of John Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.h) a student wrote "On First Looking Into Breaking Bad." Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much With Us" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.n) has become "The World Is Too Much With Taylor Swift."

While this may seem slightly silly and innocuous, to pull it off requires a deep understanding of the original poem.

Students must do the following:

- Meet the same number of lines as the original
- Match the rhyme scheme of the original
- Capture the same tone (and even the shifts in tone) as the original

- Understand satire
- Demonstrate an understanding of something contemporary that they want to satirize

Brian Sztabnik
Brian

From Inspiration to Reality in Brian's Classroom

The key to success in this activity is for students to understand the purpose of satire, which is to ridicule the follies of humans and expose flaws in systems of power. Simply providing the definition alone will not accomplish this goal; it will probably confuse them. Therefore the lesson is designed to show students examples of satire and help them distinguish satire from other forms of humor.

So, rather than start with a definition, I start with a classic headline from *The Onion* (2005)—"CIA Realizes It's Been Using Black Highlighters All These Years"—and share the photo at the top of the article.

Scan the QR code to view the article and accompanying photo.

qrs.ly/4vgaybp

I then distribute my "Understanding Satire" graphic organizer (Table 8.1) that helps them understand the concepts of satire before I ever give them the formal definition. We work together as a class to fill in the first three boxes for *The Onion* headline (Table 8.1).

Once I have modeled the first row for *The Onion* headline, I show them an SNL clip, typically one in which a cast member does a political impersonation, and I ask them to fill in the boxes on their own. Finally, I put up an ad from *Adbusters* magazine (Google "best *Adbusters* spoof images"), and they do the same.

Scan the QR code to download a blank version of the graphic organizer.

qrs.ly/xsgaybr

After we go over the graphic organizer and students share their observations about the humor, I provide the formal definition of satire and tell them that this is a subgenre of comedy, along with other subgenres like slapstick, cringe, and dark comedy.

Once the students see examples of satire and grasp its purpose and conventions, then we can begin applying it to the poems we read in the unit. I start this transition by listing the titles of all the poems that we studied in the unit. Then I explain to them that each poem presents an opportunity to be modernized and satirized by ridiculing something contemporary.

As I announce some of the titles from years past (several of which I mentioned earlier), students' eyes light up with inspiration. Just naming a few titles is good enough. I don't want to go beyond three or four titles or show samples from previous years. This works best if you don't lead them down a narrow path.

Table 8.1 "Understanding Satire" Graphic Organizer

OBJECT	TARGET	WHAT MAKES IT FUNNY
Article headline and photo	The CIA is the main target, but it also seems like it is targeting big government bureaucracies.	It assumes that the CIA operates on a high level of intelligence, because that is part of its name and identity, but it shows that it is prone to foolish mistakes and isn't as sophisticated as we assume.

Then, they are off, excitedly thinking about these three things:

Something they want to ridicule

+

The poem that best suits this purpose

+

How they can pull it off

Variations

Consider the following variations to make the lesson work for your students.

- Another great way into the lesson is to play any Weird Al Yankovic music video in conjunction with the video for the song he is paying homage to.

- *The Simpsons* and *The Daily Show* both present great opportunities for students to see satire. To stay as current as possible, just search YouTube for satire clips from either show.
- For students who are struggling to come up with subjects for their poem, you can generate lists of celebrities, films, fast-food chains, songs, childhood TV shows, and anything else pop culture–related that can make for great subjects for parody.

The Lesson Plan

Time

45 minutes

Materials

A headline from *The Onion*, an SNL clip, and an image from *Adbusters*; "Understanding Satire" graphic organizer (Table 8.1) for each student

Opening Activity

- Begin the lesson by saying, "I saw this headline on the internet and thought it was hilarious. Can you help me pinpoint what is funny about it?"
- Put the headline and image from *The Onion* on the SMART Board.
- After students have shared their ideas on its humor, distribute the graphic organizer and walk through filling in the three boxes of the first row.
- Do the same for an SNL clip and a mock advertisement from *Adbusters* magazine.
- Ask students to complete the next two rows of the graphic organizer in pairs.
- Once students have completed the graphic organizer, allow them to share their observations with the class, having a great discussion about the target and the intended humor.

Main Activity

- Once students have seen examples of satire, provide them with a formal definition. Here's the one that works best for me:
  - *Satire*—a form of humor that often uses ridicule to expose the flaws and vices in a person, group, or system
- Tell students that they have the opportunity to have some fun with the poems that were studied in the unit by satirizing them.
- Make a list of all the poems studied in the unit.
- Go over the parameters of the assignment:
  - Meeting the same number of lines as the original
  - Matching the rhyme scheme of the original

- Capturing the same tone (and even the shifts in tone) as the original
- Borrowing some of the phrases of the original poem, but supplementing it with words and phrases of your own
- Demonstrating an understanding of satire

- Share a few titles that students have developed over the years to spark some inspiration.
- Allow students time to start working and let them know that they will have to share part of their work at the end of the period.

Closure

- The lesson ends with students providing a little bit of a teaser. Each student has to read aloud their working title and at least one line (and up to four lines) from the poem that they are developing.

How to Get 100% Engagement

Over the years, I have seen students get really excited throughout this lesson, but just as we approach the moment to begin writing, they paralyze themselves. So often they build up self-imposed pressure to be great. All they focus on is the end result—making their peers laugh hysterically—that they lose sight of taking the first step of coming up with an idea. This is where generating a list of pop culture topics can help. Getting started is always the hardest step in the journey, but once students are on the road, they really love the opportunity to write a poem that isn't like most of the poems they read—serious, dark, or romantic. They relish the opportunity to be funny.

Twitter-Style Chats

LESSON 9

Lesson Learning Objective

Students will gain a deeper understanding of a poem by learning from each other as they participate in a fast-moving, silent discussion in which everyone's ideas are seen rather than heard.

Background

Why would any teacher want to be on Twitter? (I refuse to call it X.)

What was once the kids' turf has now become a swamp of political slander, social angst, and viral clips. So, what good could come from teachers invading the land of vanity and self-absorption? What good could possibly come from communicating in 140 characters at a time?

A lot, actually. Twitter is a powerful social media tool for community building. If you take the time to reflect and listen, with humility, to what other teachers have to say on Twitter, you will be amazed by what you can learn. There was a time when teachers' professional growth was limited to interactions with people in their own buildings or to state and national conferences. Now, we are in a brave new world where you can learn from those who teach the same content, fight the same battles, and search for similar answers. No longer are you limited to your district; now your learning community is the world.

I know this firsthand. For nearly a decade, I have hosted #aplitchat on Twitter on Sunday nights. Each week 20–30 English teachers gather online for a one-hour conversation around a common hashtag (#). I select a topic or text to discuss, post questions in 5–7-minute increments, and allow participants to reflect on their teaching while learning from each other.

It has been a remarkable learning experience. Unlike a Q and A session in a classroom in which the most vocal students dominate the conversation, Twitter chats allow every voice to be heard. No one is left out of the conversation, which allows for deeper confirmations of understanding all while opening the possibility for broader learning as multiple perspectives are given the opportunity to be expressed.

Brian Sztabnik
Brian

From Inspiration to Reality in Brian's Classroom

When the pandemic hit, I knew this format would be my best chance to bridge the divide that separated my in-class students from those joining us remotely. It was the only way I was able to re-create a whole-classroom environment and get genuine participation from my at-home students.

I used Google Meet to host the chat instead of Twitter, asked students to turn their cameras and microphones off to avoid distractions, and began posting questions in 5-minute increments.

It felt like a classroom again. In fact, it worked so well that when my district went one-to-one with each student having their own Chromebook a year later, I knew I wanted to incorporate it as an experience periodically in my class.

Ever since then, Twitter-style chats are something that I use in my poetry units, as well as my novel units. After all, every voice deserves to be heard, not just the loudest.

What's interesting about this lesson is that there is very little direct instruction provided by the teacher at the front of the room. It is also unconventional from a lesson-plan perspective because it does not follow the opening activity, main activity, and closure format of typical lessons.

It is student-centered learning that evolves over the course of the questions. The questions guide the lesson, and the fact that every student responds provides whole-class feedback that a teacher craves.

Here is a generic sample of 10 questions that you can ask about any poem.

Q1. What is your favorite line?

Q2. Which line is troublesome?

Q3. Often in poetry, details reveal the characters. Which details reveal things about the characters in this poem, and what do they reveal?

Q4. Is the poet doing anything interesting with structure? Are there important line breaks or stanza breaks? Is there a relationship between the parts and the whole?

Q5. Contrasts are the result of shifts or juxtapositions, sometimes both. What contrasts exist in the poem?

Q6. Which words and phrases are loaded with meaning in this poem? Choose a few and make inferences about the way in which they are being used.

Q7. What, if anything, is figurative in this poem? And if it is figurative, how does it operate?

Q8. Make an inference about the poem's title.

Q9. List all the subjects that this poem tackles.

Q10. Why is this poem important?

For a more specific example, here are the 10 questions I used in my class centered on Ada Limón's beautiful poem "Dead Stars" (Academy of American Poets, n.d.b).

Scan the QR code to read Ada Limón's poem "Dead Stars."

qrs.ly/dhgaybu

Q1. What's your favorite line?

Q2. Which part of this poem is difficult?

Q3. There is a lot that is figurative in the poem. It is so easy to jump there initially, missing the literal. Let's slow down. Literally, what is our speaker doing?

Q4. What has provoked the speaker into utterance?

Q5. What does the speaker recognize and realize about stars?

Q6. How is this moment "almost romantic" for the speaker (stanza 4)?

Q7. What is implied in the line "to lean in the spotlight of streetlight with you"?

Q8. Why does the speaker choose to end the poem with a series of rhetorical questions?

Q9. There are two metaphors that the speaker uses to describe herself in stanza 2. She says she is "a hearth of spiders these days: a nest of trying." What does the speaker recognize in herself?

Q10. What are some of the various emotions that the speaker experiences throughout the poem?

If you notice, there is a gradual progression that exists in these questions. The first two are ones that any student can answer, and that is by design. Every student can pick out a favorite line. This is like dipping your toes in the water of a pool, rather than plunging into the deep end right away. It is meant to get every student comfortable participating. They are not putting their analytical skills out there on full display right away. All they are doing is quoting from the poem. This enables a comfort that will gradually give them the confidence to share deeper insights, the further we go in the chat.

A few years ago, students started giving each other shout-outs in an organic way, unprovoked by me, during the chats. They were praising their peers' responses, congratulating them on their wisdom, and thanking them for providing another point of view or articulating something in a way they wished they could have achieved.

They said things like, "@ Sara -EXACTLY! Thank you for explaining what I was thinking so much better than I did."

Or, "@josh, good catch! The title seems to have very little to do with either the literal events or the representations of love & sacrifice."

What was remarkable about this was I saw classroom culture unfolding with each successive shout-out. Think about it: Students often receive praise from a teacher on the thoughtfulness of a response in class, but how often do they receive the same gratitude from their peers? If anything, the most common student experience is to be ridiculed by a peer. This flips that dynamic and truly creates a community of learners.

The shout-outs were such a powerful tool for positive students' esteem that I began encouraging it in every chat by saying, "If you find yourself nodding your head in agreement to a response, give them a shout-out in the comments." This typically begins around question 3 or 4, when greater analytical thinking is required.

Variations

To adapt the lesson to your classroom, consider the following variations.

- While I use Google Meet to host the chat, and use the chat feature built into it, you could also use any message-board-based platform like Padlet, Microsoft Teams, or anything else that allows for the display of multiple responses to a question. I would caution you against using Google Docs, as it is very distracting for the students to see each other type in real time, while they are trying to focus on the composition of their own response.
- Teachers often ask if I have ever had a student post anything inappropriate in the chat. Luckily I have not, but I understand the concern. Having students use their names and saving a copy of the chats has always helped prevent it. If this is a concern, you can always reduce the number of questions and give them to students the day before. The following day, you can place students in small groups and have them work as a team to share ideas and develop a collective answer to the question, letting each member take turns typing an answer to a question.
- The format encourages concise answers. If you want to expand on this lesson, you can ask students to respond in greater detail to one of the questions from the chat. Cut and paste is a gift from the gods because it allows you to save the chat transcript, post it to a Google Doc, and have students review it at home and expand an answer to one of the questions.

The Lesson Plan

Time

45 minutes

Materials

Each student needs their own device (laptop, Chromebook, iPad, etc.) and a copy of a poem.

Opening Activity

- Distribute copies of the poem that will be studied that day.
- Allow students 5–7 minutes to complete their initial annotations (I like to use the L.I.T. method: Literal, Inferences, Thematic).
- Once time is up, have students take out their devices and join the Google Meet (or your chat platform of choice).
- Inform students that they need to keep their cameras and microphones off.

Main Activity

- Post questions in increments (I like 4–5 minutes, which gives students time to formulate a response and read their classmates' answers as well).
- Start with questions that will get 100% participation, like "What's your favorite line?," and gradually increase the sophistication level of the questions.
- Around question 3 or 4, encourage students to give each other shout-outs on their responses.

Closure

- If time permits at the end, ask students for feedback on the poem or the experience, or both, not on their laptops, but verbally. I like questions that have them reflect on what they learned from others about the poem that they did not initially see and how it felt to receive praise from a peer.

How to Get 100% Engagement

The whole key is the first question or two. It can't be intimidating; otherwise, students won't feel confident or comfortable responding. It should be a question that every student can answer, one that sends them back into the poem to find something good but does not require a defense or

analytical thinking. If you can achieve that, this lesson will get great participation because it differs significantly from class discussions. When a student raises a hand and answers a question in a class discussion, all eyes and ears are on them. It is a solo performance. In this format, there is great comfort in knowing that your answers create a chorus of responses, all in harmony with the question.