

# POEMS ARE TEACHERS

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*How Studying Poetry Strengthens Writing in All Genres*

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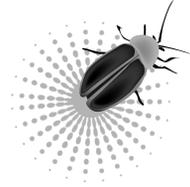
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FOR LEE BENNETT HOPKINS,

WHO FILLS THE WORLD WITH POETRY AND LAUGHTER



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## FOREWORD

Amy's grand title, *Poems Are Teachers: How Studying Poetry Strengthens Writing in All Genres*, names the promise of this book, and every ravishing word thereafter supports that thesis and never lets us down. Amy convinces us that devoting time to deep study and practice of the specific features and techniques of poetry will elevate any type of prose, and we should determine to make plenty of space for poem reading and writing in our classrooms.

Amy's prolific practice as a writer of jewel-like poems certainly gives her authority to pronounce poetry as teacher of all kinds of writing. Witness this very book as proof! The prose sings; the ideas enthrall; the organization invigorates. Amy's writing is like a Dove Chocolate—elegant and unassuming, but oh, so rich. Her language illuminates and delights, as in this sentence: “But remember, like chefs, writers are creative people, and they often invent new ways to combine phrase-ingredients and word-spices” (123). Or this one: “Our hearts have been zipped open with words” (187). Writing that delicious inspires me to produce a bumper sticker, or indeed, a national standard that will apply in every classroom for every age group: *Teach poetry writing because poetry teaches everything*.

I can attest to Amy's claim that the art and skill of making poems strengthens all kinds of composition. Writing poetry, I often joke, helped earn my college degrees. My course papers stood out in the stacks of essays and gave my professors some joy to read, or so they reported. I believe the techniques I learned making poems translated to my prose writing, affecting everything from provocative titles, to sentence cadence and variety, and especially to lessons in revising (cutting, mostly) for clarity and meaning. Astronomy class? Over my head, much of it, and I made a C on the multiple-choice exam. But my research paper contained a galaxy of metaphors, and in a sort of bonus section, I included several poems, one that compared the end of an unfortunate love relationship to a supernova explosion, where one of the stars steals matter from its companion star, exhausting its nuclear fuel. (Or something like that.) Perhaps the poem's metaphor demonstrated for my professor that I had a reasonable understanding of the science.

Unlike the murkiness of my supernova–love analogy, the organization of this book is crystal clear and effective. You can dip in and out as you wish, in any order you prefer, to find a lesson that teaches an art or a technique of poem writing. The teaching comes in the form of quick try-its that will fly out of the book and into kids’ hearts, inviting them to write poems with strength, wit, and beauty.

You can also keep this book open on your desk as a constant companion to consult for powerful lessons in crafting fiction, essay, and argument writing, or for sparking informational texts during science, history, and math. Amy provides numerous examples of poetic techniques inside all kinds of narrative and nonnarrative prose texts that you can use to demonstrate.

As if the wealth of Amy’s own writing and teaching ideas were not enough by themselves, she gifts us with a trove of poems by our favorite children’s poets, who reveal the secrets of their thinking and their craft decisions for each contribution. Jane Yolen’s explanation of the multiple reasons she chose the word *smudge* is priceless. In addition, Amy presents dozens of stunning poems by young students working with the various poetry techniques that sit companionably beside their mentors.

I promise that you are about to experience joy reading this book. I am positive that sharing the poems, the how-tos, and the inner workings of all these poets’ hearts and minds with your students will magically, even miraculously improve their poetry and prose. And I hope that some of Amy Ludwig VanDerwater’s magic dust will inspire you to write your own poems as well.

—Katherine Bomer



# INTRODUCTION

## *Why Poems?*

Poems are teachers. From grandparents' lullabies to rhyming picture books to barroom limericks to long-remembered eulogies, we all have ribbons of poetry tied to our bones. Poems change us. Anyone lucky enough to have been read poetry as a child carries certain lines forever, and anyone who has found poetry as an adult knows to hang on as if to a wild horse. For poems wake us up, keep us company, remind us that our world is big and small. And, too, poems teach us how to write. Anything.

Poems are the words of people who long to tell stories, teach, invite thoughts. Poems are shaped differently than prose, but reading poetry closely is a smart way to explore the qualities of *all* strong writing, from meaning to organization. From poetry, we learn to:

- find ideas and self-inspire
- structure texts
- use language in pleasing and surprising ways
- craft beginnings and endings
- choose titles

*Poems Are Teachers* is a book about learning how to write well by studying poems. Writers of all genres must have ideas, must organize these thoughts, must hammer interesting phrases together, must begin and end, must title. Poets arrange words and phrases just as prose writers do, simply in tighter spaces. In the tight space of poetry, readers can identify writing techniques after reading one page, not thirty pages. We notice how a poet writes with sensory imagery,

and the very next morning we open the newspaper to find an opinion columnist using this same technique. Same tool, different genre. Beginning with poems, we can teach students to recognize craft and deepen their understandings of it across genres and beyond specific assignments.

## My Poetry Connection

I still have my childhood copy of Gyo Fujikawa's *A Child's Book of Poems*, and I now own the little three-ring binder of poems that my great-aunt Tom (the flapper) typed for herself. I remember Professor O'Brien's voice as he read us Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" in the basement at SUNY Geneseo so many years ago, and today, when I feel joyous or lost, I try to find a poem to match my mood. I am grateful for others' words; poems have made me me.

I write poems too. From April 2010 to April 2011, I wrote and shared a poem and poetry minilesson every day at my blog, *The Poem Farm*. Waiting for *Forest Has a Song* to be published, I spent April 2010 posting a new poem every day for National Poetry Month and came to appreciate the daily practice of finding an idea, structuring a text, playing with words, and publishing, all within twenty-four hours. The practice was so interesting that I continued posting fresh daily poems for 365 days. That year taught me a lot about writing.

My experience as a fifth-grade teacher, writing teacher, and author of essays and children's books has taught me, over and over, that poetry is our wisest writing teacher. Through the short lines of a poem, we can explore everything from the joy of rhythm to how print layout changes a reader's pace. We fall to our knees in wonder at the beauty of words, and then we dust off those same knees and get to work strengthening our own sentences.

# Putting This Book to Work

By looking at the following chart, you will see how various respected writing teachers describe strong writing with different words but much the same meaning.

## STRONG WRITING CHART

| <i>6 + 1 Traits of Writing</i><br>Education Northwest<br>educationnorthwest.org | <i>Teaching the Qualities of Writing</i><br>JoAnn Portalupi<br>and Ralph Fletcher | <i>Assessing Writers</i><br>Carl Anderson | Use this column to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• plan a unit</li> <li>• study a poem or other text</li> <li>• look at student writing</li> </ul> |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ideas   | Content   | Meaning                                   |   |
| Organization  | Design  | Structure                                 |   |
| Word Choice   | Language  | Detail                                    |   |
| Sentence Fluency  |   |   |   |
| Conventions   | Presentation  | Conventions                               |   |
| Presentation  |   |   |   |
| Voice   | Voice   | Voice                                     |   |

As writing teachers, our work is to help students understand how the qualities of strong writing transcend genre, and for me that work has been grounded in this chart. Not comfortable with seeing things in only one way, I pieced the columns together from the wise work of the *6 + 1 Traits* researchers at Education Northwest (see also Culham 2016), and JoAnn Portalupi and Ralph Fletcher (2004), and Carl Anderson (2005). This chart lives inside my writing teacher mind. Whenever I read students' writing, I listen to ideas/content/meaning first. Is this writing meaningful to writer and reader? Does it make sense? Then I move to organization/design/structure, considering the way the text is sewn together. Can a reader follow it? How do the pieces fit? How does the work begin and end? If it is well organized, I move to language, noting clever turns of phrase, metaphor, fresh descriptions. Lastly, I study grammar and conventions. Voice, for me, is the way a writer juggles these qualities of strong writing balls, the style with which she keeps them in the air. The blank column is where I might take conferring notes about a particular writer or plan lessons for a certain genre, using these qualities of writing as a planning guide.

In this book, you will explore the qualities of strong writing through the craft of particular poems. Depending on your needs and interests, there are many ways you might choose to use this resource, but whichever you choose, please enjoy the poems first. Read aloud together. Read quietly. Sketch or paint a line from a poem. Act out a poem. Play with words and reread. Share a poem each morning or week, collecting favorite lines. Make time to read and fall in love with texts—before you study craft. See, when we as readers care about the words of a poem, we will be interested in learning how the writer moved us. We must fall in love first.

Here are a few possible ways you might use this book.

### **TECHNIQUE OF THE WEEK IN WRITERS' NOTEBOOKS**

Many young writers in grades 3 and up keep notebooks focused on a current genre of study. But writers' notebooks are the perfect place to experiment with new writing moves outside of genre study. Sharing techniques from this book during notebook time is one way to breathe life into your students' notebooks. Share one of the explorations in this book and give students a few minutes to try out the technique, either with an old entry or with a new one.

You might anchor students' study of craft in a "Technique of the Week," grounded in poetry but then expanded out to other genres. For example, students might study circular endings with Rebecca Kai Dotlich's poem "Cabin of One Hundred Lights" on Monday, add this technique to their palettes, experiment with it in their notebooks, and throughout the week notice and collect

circular beginnings and endings from information, narrative, and opinion texts. Keeping track of these techniques in writers' notebooks, in a collective class craft notebook (a place to keep track of class learnings about craft), or on charts will help students develop repertoires across genres.

## **LESSONS AND MENTORS IN CURRENT UNITS AND CONFERENCES**

If you're looking for mentor texts or language to help explain a particular writing technique, use this book to add a lesson to an existing writing unit, showing students how they might end articles with a brief word or phrase or find essay ideas by studying artwork. Similarly, as students draft and revise, use this book during writing conferences, sharing model poems by contemporary poets and children as you teach students new techniques. Make sure it's clear that the strong writing students admire in poems translates directly to the strong writing they admire in other genres.

## **A POETRY UNIT**

You might use this book to plan a unit of poetry. Choose a few lessons from each chapter to tailor a monthlong or mini poetry unit, and use the mentor texts provided. If you do this, be sure to check out the books and visit the websites of the poets highlighted. The world of poetry for children is vast and beautiful, including yet extending far beyond humor and acrostics.

## **About the Poems**

Each exploration in this book includes three poems, one by a contemporary adult poet and two by students. Be sure to share the quotes from the contemporary poets with your students, and invite them to explore the highlighted poetry books and websites to find new favorites.

While I have selected poems as models for each technique in this book, both for ease of use and to introduce readers to new poets, feel free to use your own favorites or to collect additional poems for each technique. The poems here are possible models, but I imagine teachers and students keeping classroom scrapbooks of techniques, including examples of poetry and prose that highlight each type of craft. Such scrapbooks might include a mishmash of poets, from a famous poet to a second grader who just wrote his first list poem.

The student poems may more closely match the style of poems your own students will write, so be sure to share these. Rhyme is difficult to master, and in order to highlight meaning and focus on various poetic techniques, most student

poems in this book do not rhyme. Rather, these students have closely attended to literary techniques such as point of view, repetition, and onomatopoeia.

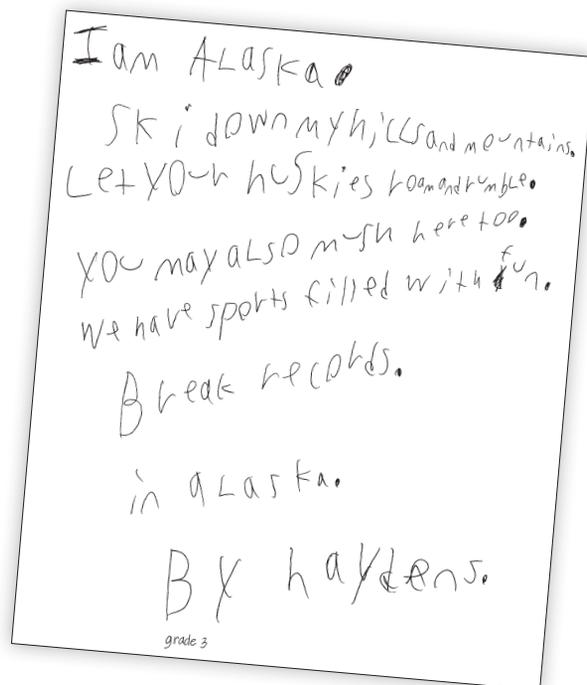
It was difficult to decide where to place many poems in this book, as each one demonstrates a variety of interesting writing moves. Talk with your students about anything they notice and admire in any poem you read together. After all, each poem can teach many writing techniques. For example, a poem might tell a story *and* use a simile *and* have a mysterious title.

Should you wish to share any of your students' poems with me, please contact me through my website, [www.amyludwigvanderwater.com](http://www.amyludwigvanderwater.com). I keep a catalog of student poems, by technique, at *The Poem Farm*, as a reference for teachers and young writers, and I welcome new poetry.

Finally, I encourage you to keep the same type of notebook or folder that your students keep as you explore these poems and techniques together. When teachers experiment with new writing tools, they understand those tools more deeply, and a notebook is a safe place to jump into new strategies, to take risks. When you write with your students, you become a true part of your classroom writing community. You can say, "When I tried this . . ." and students will learn from you, the writer-teacher who shares their journey.

## My Hope

In February 2015, I had the good fortune to visit Wealthy Elementary School in East Grand Rapids, Michigan. There, in the voice of the state of Alaska, third-grade Hayden invited readers of his poem to "Let your huskies roam and rumble."



Hayden's line made me smile, and I can still see those huskies, roaming, rumbling in the cold. My wish for you, Reader, is that the huskies of word and line and stanza will rumble you joyfully through the snowy hills of poetry. May these huskies of word and line and stanza show you that poetry—the heart and craft of it—is everywhere, in our lives, in our magazines, in our newspapers, and in our souls.

xo,

a.



## WRITERS STRUCTURE TEXTS

If you build a new home, your friend will ask, “What is the floor plan?” You will answer with details about your soon-to-be ranch, center entrance colonial, or geodesic dome, and your friend will easily envision the structure of your home-to-be. We have house-shape pictures in our minds. So it is with writing.

Like houses, excepting perhaps the Winchester Mystery House, most texts have observable structures, and young writers benefit from learning to analyze how pieces of writing are constructed. When reading a novel, we notice whether it moves straight through time or flips between past and present. When reading an article, we pay attention to whether it is structured through time, by comparison, or as a list. In the same way, when we read a poem and ask, “How do the parts fit together?” we help our students understand how poetry structures mirror the structures of other genres.

Some writers plan and follow blueprints like architects; others let a structure emerge. And just as a homeowner may call a builder with a change, a writer may alter a text’s organization while drafting or revising. But regardless of how a piece is written, writers benefit from studying its structure.

I once attended a workshop in which the leader explained that every piece of writing can be seen as a story or a list. Consider patriotic songs. “The Star-Spangled Banner” tells a story moving through time with a clear beginning, middle, and end. We (first person plural) battle through the night, but at the end our flag remains. On the other hand, “America the Beautiful” moves through a list of several American strengths, praising our purple mountains and pilgrim feet, with a repeating refrain requesting grace. We can find these two organizational structures—story and list—in everything we read and write. Of any text, we ask, “Is this a story or list—or some of both?”

Authors compose stories and lists in different ways, and the patterns we find in texts offer possible structures for our own writing ideas. Studying

structure, a writer realizes that her *idea* about fish can be shaped as a *story* about a time she went ice fishing or it can be shaped as a *list* of reasons to protect waterways. She can now write either a narrative or an opinion draft, each organized differently. Experimenting with various structures can push ideas into new territory too. Our fishergirl, drafting an informational how-to fishing guide, will think in different ways, challenged by an informational structure. Many authors live off of the land of one or two topics for life, reshaping their favorite subjects in different containers of genre and form.

An understanding of structure and organization grows from reading and talking about writing architecture. Sometimes we skip structure study, instead turning to premade graphic organizers that feed us for only one day. To feed writers for more than one writing day, we can teach them to “read like writers,” as Katie Wood Ray describes in *Wondrous Words* (1999), learning ways to shape and plan ideas across a writing life.

## Learn to Structure Texts from Poems

With their few lines, poems simplify structure study. The first stanza of Arlene Mandell’s poem “Little Girl Grown” (2001) begins on Monday—“Monday I tied blue ribbons in her hair”—moves through other days of the week, finally ending on Sunday, when the little girl is all grown up and has moved away with her fiancé. Similarly, in Ed Young’s *Seven Blind Mice*, a retelling of an Indian tale, each page explains what a different mouse saw on each day of the week. This poem and picture book, along with many other texts, share a days-of-the-week structure, and in a poem, we recognize this without turning a page.

Structure, organization, helps us know where we are going as writers. For readers, structure offers comfort—readers can count on the builder of this piece to shape a house that makes sense. When we study structure through poems, we teach our students to see how a story poem is like a personal narrative, how a poem with two parts is similar to a magazine article that compares and contrasts. Before long, students begin to recognize, “We know a poem shaped like this book. We know a poem shaped like this essay. We’ve seen this architecture in poems—let’s bring it to prose.”

## My Heart

It was the biggest,  
most beautiful Valentine.  
Sitting in fifth grade  
we watched Ms. Hernandez  
cut and paste cardboard,  
ribbons and lace to create  
a work of art—a giant heart  
with curly ribbons  
that sprang back when  
she pulled on them.

The words “*Be Mine*”  
winked and smiled  
from its lovely face.  
We touched the pretty lace  
with our fingertips.

Every day I’d lift my eyes  
to that heart, wishing  
for it, not for myself,  
but for *mi mami*.  
She would know  
just how much I loved her  
if I got straight A’s  
and won it for her.

On February 14th,  
*Dia de San Valentin*,  
Ms. Hernandez,  
shook a pink satin box  
in the air—a treasure chest.

I cupped my hands,  
put my head down,  
and prayed deep inside.  
I prayed from the very heart  
of my heart—I prayed  
from *mi corazón*.

Suddenly, the whole class  
clapped. I lifted my head.  
Mrs. Hernandez’ eyes shone.  
“Lupita,” she read my name  
from the red ticket in her hand  
and smiled, softly, sweetly.

On wobbly legs,  
like a clumsy toad,  
I stumbled out of my desk  
to receive my prize.  
It was a miracle.  
I was sure of it.

That afternoon  
I traipsed home  
with that huge, red heart  
tucked safely under my arm.  
It slapped against my leg,  
stroked my ankle,  
and scraped the ground.  
That’s how big it was—  
my love.

—*Guadalupe Garcia McCall*

## WORDS FROM THE POET

*“My Heart” illustrates something that happened to me a long time ago, when I was very young. The story comes from a very important event in my life, a memorable moment, something I don’t think I will ever forget. Memories are a great place to find stories, and because they are so vivid and brief we can use these special moments in our lives to write a narrative poem (a poem that tells a story). By focusing on the structure of a narrative (beginning, middle, end) we have the story, but by using imagery (specifically the five senses) we have a visual story in the form of a poem.*

## CONSIDER THE TECHNIQUE

Narrative is the central way that humans communicate. We tell stories to connect, prove points, remember. And a strong story includes more than actions, more than a list of, “I did this . . . then I did this. . . .”

Story writing is a bit like baking a cake. When mixing cake batter, it is not enough to simply dump flour, flour, and more flour into a bowl. Cakes also need butter, sugar, and baking powder. Stories need varied ingredients too: actions, dialogue, thoughts and feelings, and descriptions. And all you need to write a strong prose story can be found in the small space of a story poem.

Stories include actions, and Guadalupe Garcia McCall captures a wide range of actions small and large that help readers see and *feel* what’s happening. Look at the physical actions she captures—clapping, head lifting, eyes shining, reading and smiling.

Stories include dialogue. In McCall’s poem, we hear Mrs. Hernandez’s voice read “Lupita” aloud. Letting the teacher speak rather than saying what she said (“Mrs. Hernandez called my name”) brings her voice to life. We readers hear her words.

Stories include characters’ thoughts and feelings. In “My Heart,” we are privy to the speaker’s secret wish and silent prayer, not because she speaks it aloud, but because she tells what is in her mind.

Finally, stories include visual and sensory descriptions. McCall describes “a giant heart / with curly ribbons / that sprang back when / she pulled on them.” Descriptions help readers leave reality and live inside the story. Descriptions help us know how fluffy and chubby Grandpa’s guinea pig is, help us reach up to touch the flaking paint on a bedroom wall.

It is important for students and writers of all genres to tell stories well. For not only does storytelling enrich our lives and deepen our wisdom, but when we can tell pointed stories, these stories can serve all of our writing, whether we wish to entertain, teach, or persuade. In *Minds Made for Stories* (2014), Thomas Newkirk asserts, “We don’t read extended texts through sheer grit, but we are carried along by some pattern the writer creates. Even if our goal is to learn information, we don’t do that well if that information is not connected in some way—and as humans the connection we crave is narrative” (18). In other words, humans want stories.

### **TRY IT**

Build your students’ internal sense of story by saturating them in story. You might tell a story each morning, but instead of saying, “Oh gosh, I almost hit a deer on the way to school today!” slow the story down. “Students. This morning, as I looked out at frost tipping the grass, my breath making chilly clouds in my car, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I wondered what it was and said. . . .” Or, as Martha Horn and Mary Ellen Giacobbe and recommend in their book *Talking, Drawing, Writing* (2007), you might create a daily ritual where students tell their stories in this same way, paying attention to the elements of good storytelling (actions, dialogue, thoughts and feelings, and description) as they share.

To help understand the sequence of stories, students can use timelines to think through a series of story events, or they can imagine these events across the pages of a blank book, thinking about what happened first, next, at the end.

Encourage students to weave together the elements of story by asking them to fold their papers in half and then in half again, labeling each quadrant with a heading: actions, dialogue, thoughts and feelings, description. From this brainstorm sheet, students can write story poems with line breaks or stories in booklets, braiding action with dialogue with feelings with description.

Through repeated and joyous storytelling, your students will learn to go beyond action-lists, in their poems, in their long narratives, and in storybits sprinkled into opinion and informational texts.

## STUDENT POEMS TO SHARE

### Magic Ride

Something big and bright  
crashed down on me.  
I pushed it off  
and inspected.  
A hot-air balloon  
was now mine.

I climbed into the basket  
not caring  
about where I was going  
or how I would steer.  
I just let the wind take me.

It was amazing  
to fly so high.  
I could gaze upon  
everything.  
I felt the wind rush  
through my hair.  
The balloon flew up high  
then dropped me through  
the roof of the building.

There were no floors.  
The building rested  
on a cloud.  
Shelves of books  
lined the walls.

It was a library.  
There were other balloons,  
but I was the only  
person here  
in this magic library.  
The destination of  
my magic ride.

By: Meghana V  
Grade 6

F e a t h e r

red bird fLyIng

got

in a fighT

f e a t h e r

came

off

red

bird

Went

home

Braeden M.  
3rd grade

**WEAVE BACK  
AND FORTH TO  
COMPARE AND  
CONTRAST**

**See Saw**

I'm up!  
I grip—  
my feet are dangling

I'm down!  
I bump—  
my bones are jangling

I'm up!  
I push—  
my back is straight

I'm down!  
I press—  
my legs take weight

It's not that far  
from up

to down—

the sky stays blue

the dirt's still brown

What I see  
and what I saw

follows all of  
nature's laws

but when I'm up  
the things I see

and when I'm down  
the way I see

feels  
wholly different

to me

—*Heidi Mordhorst*

## WORDS FROM THE POET

*This poem explores the view from two different positions, two different perspectives. Back and forth, one voice contrasts the view from the top of the seesaw with the view from the bottom. These two positions are rather close in space, but the feeling of hanging up in the air versus bumping down on the ground turns out to be very different! When we zoom in closely to capture the specific details of two places or voices or opinions in a poem, suddenly the similarities—or maybe the differences—pop out, and then we understand something new about the world.*

## CONSIDER THE TECHNIQUE

I remember riding the seesaw with my sister. When I was up, I swung my legs in sky. When I was down, I held my feet on earth. Up. Down. Up. Down. Two sets of feelings. Middle school was much the same.

A back and forth structure allows a writer to compare and contrast, and we find it in various genres: alternating between settings, characters, and points of view in fiction; or ideas, opinions, and subjects in nonfiction. Kate Messner employs this structure in her picture books *Up in the Garden and Down in the Dirt* and *Over and Under the Snow*. We recognize it in the hit song “Summer Nights” from *Grease* as Sandy and Danny sing different versions of the same date. We know this structure from Gary Paulsen’s *Canyons*, with voices and time periods alternating between a modern-day boy and the Native American boy whose skull he finds. This structure feels like a Ping-Pong game:

- your turn / my turn / your turn / my turn
- alligators / crocodiles / alligators / crocodiles
- past / present / past / present

With this structure, an author weaves two lists together, like interlacing fingers, and then she often ends the piece by breaking the pattern, bringing together the ideas, providing a deeper insight into—or playful treatment of—the subject at hand.

In Heidi Mordhorst’s poem, we follow her seesaw journey back and forth, and we experience how she feels when up and down. This structure helps writers show how two subjects are alike and different, deciding which aspects

of each to highlight. It's also rhythmic, allowing readers to anticipate the next voice or time period or topic. At times, the formatting of a text highlights the back and forth nature with different fonts, italics, or indenting. Poems for two voices, such as the ones in Paul Fleischman's *Joyful Noise*, make this back and forth structure visible.

### TRY IT

This structure is easy to spot and fun to try. Begin by making two parallel lists about two different people or places or time periods or two anything's at all. You might begin with notebook entries or with content such as historical figures or scientific wonders, whatever you wish. Here's an example:

#### **Child Wearing a Pair of Sneakers**

On a basketball court  
Proud of my sneaks  
Listening to parents cheering  
Dreaming of winning  
Eight years old

#### **Child Making a Pair of Sneakers**

In a factory  
Tired of working  
Listening to machines clattering  
Dreaming of going to school  
Eight years old

See how I could turn these two lists into a simple seesaw poem without too much trouble? Or, if I prefer, I could use this same structure to write an information/opinion book, alternating between a child who wears sneakers for basketball and a child who works in a factory, making those same sneakers.

Encourage students to write back and forth free verse poems and to reshape them as articles or essays. Help them see how a back and forth poem about two types of animals could be reshaped as an informational article in the voices of the two, each teaching about habitat, parenting styles, and diet.

In *But How Do You Teach Writing?* (2008), Barry Lane shares a poem format he calls a "lullaby weave," which alternates lines of an already existing song with lines of a personal narrative. Such a simple technique can yield profound poetry and make this structure clear.

## STUDENT POEMS TO SHARE

Do's and Don'ts  
to  
Be in Miss. Corgill's Class.

Do: learn how to collaborate.  
Don't: Be a bully.  
Do: Be an upstander.  
Don't: act CRAZY.  
Do: be your self  
Don't: be mean (we will work it out.)  
Do: learn from mistakes  
Don't: have a bad attitude.  
Do: be curious.  
Don't: say someone is wierd.  
Do: be a thinker.  
Do: be Determined.  
Do: be courageous.  
Do: be a hard worker.  
Do: grow.  
Do: be a teacher.  
Do: be a lot a lot of other things.

by Moira D.  
grade 3

## Dogs

Dogs are mans best friend  
they are always there.  
Listening in, even if they don't care.

Woof! Woof! I bark,  
danger ahead, watchout for the door,  
someone may break in.

My dog looks out for me  
through good times and bad,  
always ready to comfort me when I am sad.

Woof! Woof! Belly rubs ahead  
thanks, that tickles, I love them before bed.  
Comforting you, with licks to the face,  
I love hearing your laugh when you shove me away.

Night has fallen, and by my side,  
my dog is there, always prepared.  
Watching out for danger, though having fun too.

Woof! Woof! Bed time has arrived,  
I jump into bed,  
on high alert,  
to protect my best friend.  
I love my human and he loves me too,  
I can't think of anything better to do.

By: Mia K.  
Grade 6

**BUILD TWO  
SIDES TO  
COMPARE AND  
CONTRAST**

**Soccer Sides**

Offense means head down the field—  
dribble,

pass,

try to score!

Goalie blocked your shot?

No sweat!

Follow up and shoot some more!

Defense means hang out in back.

Better keep a watchful eye!

Their offense wants the winning goal—

*Ha!*—

I'd like to see them try . . .

—*Matt Forrest Esenwine*

## WORDS FROM THE POET

*I was driving home from an indoor soccer game I'd just played and was thinking about opposite sides, differing viewpoints, and "Soccer Sides" came together. I wanted to show the two sides of a team while also showing the two teams' opposite goals (that is, desires); I also wanted to add a surprise by revealing the speaker is actually in the game! The poem's action and rhythm required some creative enjambment, too, to underscore the energy of the game itself.*

## CONSIDER THE TECHNIQUE

Organizing text by building two sides is another way to show how two things are alike or different. The difference is that instead of rocking back and forth, back and forth, a writer stays back, back, and then moves forth, forth. Here, a reader feels less movement between ideas, focusing attention first all on one subject (or idea, opinion, time period, and so on) and then moving to the second. In essays, some call this the block method: a block of text about living with Mom followed by a block of text about living with Dad.

Children will know picture books that illustrate this structure. Charlotte Zolotow's *When I Have a Little Boy / When I Have a Little Girl* can be opened from front or back, with one side listing how the speaker would raise a boy child and the other listing how the speaker would raise a girl child. And Arthur Howard's *When I Was Five* is also divided into two sections. In the first half of Howard's book, the five-year-old speaker shares some of his favorite things—a future career, a car, a dinosaur. Then we read a change page, "Now I'm Six," after which he shares his new favorites, now that he's a year older. The ending breaks the pattern, surprising readers with the same favorite friend at both ages—Mark.

In his poem, Matt Forrest Esenwine visibly delineates the difference between offense and defense on a soccer field, dedicating the first two stanzas of his poem to offense and the second two to defense. In the same way, Kristine O'Connell George's poem "Margo" (found on page 85) is split into two halves, each describing the same child, but at two different times.

There are many ways to explore different subjects with this two-sided structure. I might explore the difference between living in the country and living in town, for example, or my life before children and my life after children.

The website [diffen.com](http://diffen.com) allows readers to insert two subjects for comparison and then generates a text comparing the two, describing one in the first half of the document and the other in the second half. Once again, we find a structure in our poetry reading that can ripple out into different genres.

### **TRY IT**

To compare and contrast by building two sides, you may begin with some of the same lists and exercises from the previous lesson about weaving back and forth. Using “Soccer Sides” as a model, remind students of Esenwine’s words: “I was driving home from an indoor soccer game I’d just played and was thinking about opposite sides, differing viewpoints.” Challenge students to think of places or times in their own lives in which they notice two sides or two viewpoints: sports rivals, opinions on cell phones for children, living in a bilingual home.

Young narrative writers might experiment with this structure by writing about one idea from two points of view, perhaps writing the first point of view in one color, switching in the middle, and then writing the second point of view in a different color. After this exercise, talk about what writing from two points of view does for a writer—and for a reader.

Using a book like *When I Was Five* as a model, you might ask students to remember personal life changes. Have them each make two lists, one about life before the change and one about life after it. From these two lists, they can write notebook entries or poems or other pieces. Thinking about life before and after dog ownership, for example, might inspire an essay about the importance of pets or a nonfiction book about dog care. Regardless of whether students publish their two-sides explorations, working with ideas in this way will help students recognize a compare and contrast structure in the wild.

## STUDENT POEMS TO SHARE

### Differences

A church on every  
corner

Tall buildings  
apartments and  
parks

Cars honking  
sirens going by  
traffic traffic  
traffic

Warm beaches and  
Sugar white sand  
Painted houses and  
Pretty Gates  
delicious ackee  
family family  
family

By: Zada P.  
Grade 5

### Sisters

Sisters are hard to explain.  
Sometimes they fight with you.

And later forgive you.

They can sometimes give you  
A hard time.

And say, "You're being mean!"

And, "Stop acting like that!"

But sometimes they're  
nice.

They stand up for you.  
and share a piece of  
their Valentines candy.

And sometimes when it's raining  
They let you come under  
the umbrella.

Sisters are Sisters.

by: Ella G.  
grade 3

### At the Carnival

Who beeps his horn in a hearty hello?

“Me,” says car. “Hop in! Let’s go!”

Who sails the sea or floats on a lake?

“Me,” says boat. “Ahoy, young mate!”

Who rides the track with a clackity click?

“Me,” says train. “All board now, quick!”

Who cruises high in blue summer sky?

“Me,” says plane. “Whoopie! Let’s fly!”

Who rides cars, boats, trains and planes?

“Me,” says Child. “May I do it again?”

—*Heidi Bee Roemer*

## WORDS FROM THE POET

*When writing in a question and answer structure, first I pick a topic. I may imagine a conversation between animals or objects. What would two hippos say? What would Worm ask Robin? Or Hammer ask Nail? My poem may ask who, what, when, where, why, and how. The tone may be serious or amusing.*

## CONSIDER THE TECHNIQUE

Just as nesting dolls fit one into another, many structures fit inside other structures. The question and answer structure is a specific type of back and forth structure, and it is also a list. Many informational texts are organized through questions and answers, for example *Why? The Best Ever Question and Answer Book About Nature, Science, and the World Around You* by Catherine Ripley. We see this way of organizing text in magazines, in which it is used to structure complete articles or sidebars, as well as Q&A guides like the spay/neuter pamphlets in veterinarians' offices, and newspaper advice columns about parenting, home repair, or etiquette.

Fiction can organize itself around questions and answers too. In Barbara M. Joose's picture book *Mama, Do You Love Me?*, a little girl poses a series of questions to her mother. Does she love her? How much? Would her mother love her if she acted in a variety of naughty ways? After each question, mother reassures child that, yes, she loves her dearly and will forever, no matter how naughty she is.

A question and answer text may have a serious or lively tone. Consider Heidi Bee Roemer's "At the Carnival." Roemer could have chosen to simply list carnival rides and explain what each does. But by beginning each couplet with "Who . . .," she lightheartedly transforms these vehicles into characters, gives them voices, and perks up our ears as we wonder, "Who *does* 'ride the track with a clackity click?'" In her whimsical picture books *Who Hops?* and *Who Hoots?*, Katie Davis plays with questions and answers too.

The strength of this structure lies in its straightforwardness. It is simple to recognize and try. One need not think about transition words, and the order

of questions often does not matter. Sometimes, question and answer texts have leads or conclusions that frame them; sometimes they don't. Roemer ends her list of questions and answers with a child's voice after a series of talking vehicles. Pattern broken—poem complete.

Writers use a variation of this structure when they pose one single question and follow it with many answers. Wonderopolis.org, the popular classroom website featuring one daily question and answer, is built around this organizational pattern. One new day, one new question, one new answer. List picture books such as Rebecca Kai Dotlich's *What Is Square?* (1999) and articles like "Ready for College? Why Some Students Are Prepared More Than Others" by Lisa Heffernan (2016) pose one question and then answer it in many ways.

### **TRY IT**

Using Roemer's poem as a model, invite students to try writing in a question and answer structure by choosing familiar subjects from their own interests or from old notebook entries, art, or a content area. Model turning information into questions, just as contestants on the TV quiz show *Jeopardy!* do, creating simple question and answer poems or books or thinking in notebooks. To learn more about writing question and answer books, see chapter 3 of *First Grade Writers* (2005) by Stephanie Parsons. While Parsons' book is written for teachers of first grade, the ideas in her nonfiction chapter are useful for older writers too.

For ongoing practice with this structure, regularly ask students to each write one question and one answer about a topic of study, bringing these together into class publications. This practice doesn't take long, gives students a chance to synthesize content information, and builds up a great collection of community-written picture books or articles about the subjects you study throughout a year.

Teaching your students that questions and answers can structure a complete text will give them one more possible map for writing today—and forever.

## STUDENT POEMS TO SHARE

### Night Time At The Park

Who's walking  
down the street?  
"me" says the human  
Saying goodbye.  
Who's that  
Playing with knit?  
"me" says the cat  
rolling around with it.  
Who's that at the park?  
"me" says the kid  
going down the slide.  
Who's that in the tree?  
"me" says the bird  
going to sleep.

Written By Shayna M.

Grade 2

### Q+A interview

Hi there miss, what's your name?

It's miss Laoretta Dane

Tell me, when did Columbus sail the ocean blue?

In 1492

What's a word that starts with a P like Pentagon?

Um, Parthenon!

Tell me something about Van Gogh!

When painting Starry Night, he really let go

What about abouts lifesavers?

During emergencies, they're often our saviors.

Well, that's all, thank you very much!

If you'll excuse me now, I must eat my lunch!

By Ada B

Grade 6

### How to walk around the block

Wear shoes.  
If they have laces, make sure they are tied.  
Pick a direction and go.  
Double foot hop  
over sidewalk cracks,  
then stop and pick up a rock.  
No snooping in your neighbor's mailbox  
(You'll get in trouble if you get caught.)  
Woof bark woof bark woof bark woof;  
ask before you pet that dog.  
That stick could use a new location.  
Remember,  
where you started is your destination.  
'Cause 'round the block  
is a circle  
(even if it is really a square).  
Arriving back at your front door,  
you'll be a different person  
when you get home.

—*Michael Salinger*

## WORDS FROM THE POET

*Poetry and pattern are intertwined. Poems are a perfect vehicle to teach procedure, which is just another pattern of steps—beginning, middle, and end. In my poem I knew the start and finish point (my front door). My job was to answer the “what happens next” that occurred sequentially in between.*

## CONSIDER THE TECHNIQUE

Directions may be seriously informational or they may be fanciful, as we discover in Michael Salinger’s poem “How to walk around the block.” But regardless of slant or intent, the structure of procedural writing includes the same elements: how-to holds a reader by the hand and guides. And yes, directions are a special, organized form of list. Salinger explains, “Poetry and pattern are intertwined. Poems are a perfect vehicle to teach procedure, which is just another pattern of steps—beginning, middle, and end.”

Instructions are everywhere. Last night, my fourteen-year-old researched indoor soccer drills as I followed a recipe for lasagna. And while direction-writing primarily takes the form of informational text, this way of organizing can also apply to humor, as it does in Delia Ephron’s *How to Eat Like a Child, and Other Lessons in Not Being a Grown-Up* or in articles like the one I found on wiki-How titled “How to Take Your Pet Rock Camping.”

The structure of procedural writing is clear in Salinger’s “How to walk around the block.” First, the poem might easily be written as a numbered list of actions, sequenced from beginning to end. Start to finish, line by line, we learn what to do, and how. Along the way, Salinger anticipates where readers might make mistakes and warns them ahead of time: “No snooping” and be sure to “ask before you pet that dog.” He also seems to know what we are thinking, answering our unspoken questions in parentheses. Procedural writers must imagine, “What will my readers need to know? What might they wonder? How can I help them understand these risks and steps?”

Some procedural texts include introductions or lists of things a doer needs, and they often include a “Why?” usually at the beginning or end. (Remember the list with a twist from earlier in this chapter?) Salinger offers this at the poem’s end as he closes with a promise: if we take a walk, even just around

the block, we will be changed. This, the reason behind the instructions, is the part that makes me want to take a walk. The poem’s final twist motivates a couch potato to stand up.

Sequencing and braiding these instructional parts—ingredients, clear steps, warnings, answers to anticipated questions, and bits of motivation—are what writers of directions do. In poems—and in prose.

## **TRY IT**

Most people enjoy teaching others how to do things. Knowing how to ride a bike, fold a napkin a fancy way, write computer code—these skills are a source of pride, and sharing instructions not only can be informative to learners but can be exciting for those sharing them as well.

Play a new game, make a new craft, or cook a dish with your class. Then write a how-to—maybe in prose, maybe as a poem—with all the important parts. In terms of structure, help students see that each line or paragraph break might be a new instruction. Writing a how-to can be a useful exploration of both clear directions and clear text breaks.

Students might also keep a notebook page listing things they know how to do:

- crafts they can make
- dishes they can cook
- problems they know how to solve
- building or repair tasks they can explain
- procedures involving animals or plants
- things they do regularly that make life good (I bet Salinger likes walking!)

And of course, students can have great fun writing procedural texts with a spin, books written in different viewpoints or in silly ways, such as Susan Pearson’s picture book *How to Teach a Slug to Read* or any of Sally Lloyd Jones’ how-to series books, including *How to Be a Baby, by Me, the Big Sister*.

STUDENT POEMS TO SHARE

Sledging

It snowed  
out  
hooray  
have a snack  
have a drink  
get  
on our gear  
time to  
go  
sledding  
get to the top of the hill  
hooray time to go down  
weeeeeeeeeee

Connor M.  
grade 3

How to sleep

first put on your Pj's  
Get in bed  
Put Covers on  
Breathe in and out  
Get comfy  
close your eyes  
Dream pleasant Dreams  
And now you can SLEEP!

by James Q.  
grade 3