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CHAPTER TWO

Launching the Writing Workshop

I love jazz (you've certainly figured that out by now), but I am also a huge '80s soft rock fan. Journey, Tina Turner, Wham! (I probably shouldn't be admitting that here), Phil Collins, and, of course, The Police, are gods to me. I remember going to Sting's Soul Cages tour and, like all the other 50,000 fans, hoping the opening act would perform a quick set so we could go on with the real show. And, when we saw the opening act—a tall guy with red and blue dreadlocks and an African drum hanging from around his neck—we prayed that It. Would. Be. Over. Soon. Then Vinx opened his mouth, and a booming melodic bass came out. And when his palms hit the djembe, it spoke to us. And it was jazz. And pop. And rock. And lots of SOUL, all wrapped into one stellar opening 30-minute performance that had us all enthralled and wishing it would never end.

Begin with a Thrill

When my daughter has playdates at our house, I'm often in charge of activities. Before the pool or the swings, I facilitate a haiku scavenger hunt. The girls must search for little stickies with emotions and objects written on them (e.g., anger, bananas) and then draft haiku. There are prizes for the winners. The thrill of adventure throughout my house is bananas. (See what I did there?) I posit that the writing workshop must begin with the same thrill. An opening activity that corrals the soul, gets students primed and ready for the major exploration of wonder and woe that awaits. Since this is a writing workshop, it is imperative that the opening act introduce students to a beginning writing activity, to get the juices flowing.

Creative Jumpstarts

Over the years, I've employed a range of creative jumpstarts to get students ready and eager to write, many of which I've borrowed from my own teachers.

Discussion

When I took Nikki Giovanni's advanced poetry workshop at Virginia Tech, each class began with a discussion that sometimes quickly turned into a heated debate (and occasionally, when we discussed political issues, an argument). And then she simply said, "Now write." And we did. We were eager to share our thoughts and ideas on paper and express why we were so passionate about our views. It was as if we needed that jumpstart to prepare ourselves for the real work, for the literary journey that she wanted us to take, the journey that we didn't even know we were on.

Allowing students to lead the discussion ensures that the topic will be of interest to them. Sometimes they want to talk about their dreams the night before, the stress of school, the latest pop star controversy, or even a community tragedy. I've found that having an open, honest dialogue with students fosters a sense of community in the classroom, which is the kind of environment a productive writing workshop craves.

Music

In one of our Book-in-a-Day workshops, I had a coach bring out her guitar and play a song. Some of the students laughed at the randomness of live music in a writing workshop, but all listened, and when it was over they applauded. Immediately following the performance, I asked each student to free-write a paragraph on the song they'd just listened to—about how

Kwame QuickTip

There are hundreds of poets in your city (check your local writing center, cafe open mic, or independent bookstore for recommendations) who would love the opportunity to come to your class and read/perform. Poets from faraway places might even Skype with you. Of course, you can also read your own verse or recite a favorite poem.

they felt, about what it meant, about the title, anything about the song they felt compelled to write. No rules, just write. Some students needed a further prompt, and so I gave them the first line of their free-write: *This is what I know.* Now, every classroom doesn't have an accomplished musician who can whip out an instrument and belt out a polished number, but we all have access to music. Begin each writing workshop by letting students listen to music (especially jazz). Not only does the music empower critical and creative thinking, high-speed intellectual engagement with the ideas of others, self-actualization, and confidence, but if you choose the right song, it creates feelings of well-being and sometimes, euphoria.

Storytelling

Finally, doing a fun, interactive read aloud for your younger students or sharing a personal story for your older ones, are great ways to break the ice, to get students' attention, to begin the workshop in an enriching manner.

> *It's Mother's Day, 1982, and I have a total of $2.67 in my piggy bank. My choices for gifts are sorrowfully limited. I venture to the local drug store to peruse the aisles and notice a "gold" picture frame on sale for $1.99. Instantly I know that if I make this purchase I will have enough change for a pack of bubble gum. This becomes the defining moment in my gift shopping. It is only after I leave the store, skipping along and popping bubbles, do I figure out what will go inside the frame: A picture. Of me! Unfortunately, none of the photographs fit inside of the frame, and I can't find a pair of scissors in the house. And then it hits me. My mother is a storyteller. She loves making words dance across our imaginations, swirling and dipping, soaring and diving. And my sisters and I laugh and cry and oooh and ahhh when she spins a tale. My mother is a lover of words. So, if I can't give her a picture of me, I will do the next best thing.*
>
> *I sit down at the typewriter and type out a poetic masterpiece with a very original title: "Mother's Day." After reading the poem (it takes her a while to finish it, not because it is too complex, but because she keeps having to flick "gold" specks off of her hand), a succession of teardrops scuttle down her face. We hug and she lets me watch television until I fall asleep (as a rule, we weren't allowed to watch television in our home, except on Fridays for one hour, so this was a big deal). I dream that night about other ideas for poems and stories to share with my family and friends. I figure if my words get this type of encouraging emotional response, maybe I should write a poem a day. After all, it only took me a half an hour to write the Mother's Day ode. This is the day I fall in love with poetry.*

Thirty years and 25 published books later, and I'm still in love. The incandescent reaction I received from my mother on that day in 1982 remains with me today. It's the main reason I continue to write poetry. Poetry is supposed to take you somewhere, make you feel ... something. I remember liking that feeling. Now, the poem I wrote back then was horrendous, and thus I won't share it here in these pages, on grounds that it might incriminate me in the world poetry court. However, here's a haiku I wrote for her, much later in life:

there would be no books
without the childhood tales
the playful way you loved

Invariably, the shared or independent writing that comes out of these creative jumpstarts is some combination of humorous, heart-wrenching, and revelatory. The writing isn't judged for craft, and sharing is encouraged. We want the students enthralled in the creative process. We want them excited, not bored. We want them to embrace the writing, not be intimidated by it. How we open our workshop will set the stage for how our students act and react.

All these strategies have worked for me, but none have worked better than just diving right in between the lines of a good poem.

Pull a Poem Out of Your Pocket

Teaching poetry is often a balancing act between the technical aspects of form and the creative aspects of writing. Reciting rules and stressing form can stifle creativity or turn students (and teachers) off of poetry. That's why Broadway is so important. (Yes. I just said Broadway!) Start your workshop with an activity that lets the words leap off the page and onto the STAGE. Make the words come alive. The best way for you and your students to see that poetry is fun and cool, is to see it. To listen to it. Live!

The aim of this chapter is to introduce (or reintroduce) you and your students to the beauty and magic of other people's poetry. To proclaim what poetry is (fun and cool) and deny what it is not (boring). To demystify one of the world's most ancient forms of literary language. To help you feel comfortable in an environment of rhythm, rhyme, concise wordplay, and emotion, powered by poetry. Don't worry, you won't have to write any original poetry in this chapter. Promise! This is strictly about taking a dip in the pool, or to continue the jazz

metaphor, to sample some different tunes, get a feel for what we like, and perhaps, for what we didn't know we liked.

After college, I moved to Arlington, Virginia, to embark upon my literary journey. To become a poet. I was advised by countless friends and family, that "poetry doesn't sell, so get a real job." They didn't think it was a worthy career choice. They didn't understand poetry. In some ways, they were afraid of it, because most of the verse they'd been exposed to during their schooling was staid and hieroglyphic, at best. Boring, at worst. Does that sound familiar? I've met countless teachers over the years who've expressed this same sentiment. This was my first clue, that if you want people to be interested in poetry, you simply must expose them to interesting poetry. Makes sense, right? Same applies for us educators.

THE SUMMARY

We were as tight as
a closed book
until someone opened us
and read the pages
read our secrets.

Then you wrote a summary
of the book
and read it aloud in class.
The rumors are spreading.

What kind of friend are you?

—Mariam, Grade 6

On the bus to my real job each day, as I prepared to toil away in Corporate America, I read poetry. Interesting poetry. I laughed at the rhymes of Langston Hughes and smiled at the passion of Pablo Neruda. The words came alive for me, and this daily immersion served as tremendous inspiration for my own writing. It got me revved up, excited, ready to tell my own stories. And that I did, during lunch. Sneakily at my desk. I even wrote a few haiku on breaks with the smokers even though I didn't smoke.

This is where I believe we must begin our poetry or writing workshops with our students. Pull a poem out of your pocket. An accessible poem. A relatable poem. A poem that you like. Even better, a poem that you love.

QUESTIONS for KWAME

Where do you get inspiration from?

From my daughters, from reading, from artwork, from life. I am a willing participant in life. I walk through life paying attention to everything, eavesdropping on everyone, and I find myself inspired by the littlest things—a smile on a rainy day—and the biggest—Love.

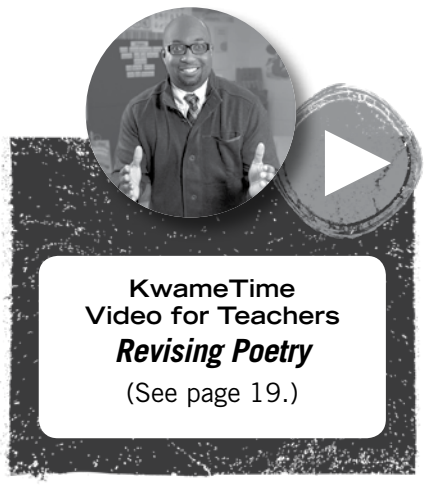
CHAPTER FIVE

Revising Is Re-Envisioning

Revision involves reflection and rethinking not what a piece of writing is, but what it might become. It requires time to consider roads not traveled in the first draft. It often involves collaboration and discussion. It can include sticky notes, index cards, computerized comments, colored pencils, highlighters, and messes. Always messes. And always allow time.

—Kate Messner

If you ask teachers, they will tell you that revision is one of the most difficult tasks to get students to perform regularly. Some of the children struggle so much to complete the assignment, they are happy to get it finished. Other children have basketball, swimming, or dancing three evenings a week and are not very interested in performing a thorough revision. Even the most eager and enthusiastic writers are ready to move on to something new once they have completed a draft. Convincing them that good writing requires extensive revision can be onerous. The good news is that poetry, with its nuance, sensory engagement, and attention to language, can help you make the case.



One Size Does Not Fit All

Revision encompasses a range of different elements, including capitalization, word choice, organization, and content. Even the simplest revision checklist is likely to have 5 to 10 items. Simple revision can include looking to see if the text makes sense, if the grammar

and spelling are correct, and if the use of words is effective. The task of revision can seem so overwhelming that it becomes an exercise that students and teachers want to avoid.

We must keep in mind that revision is not a one-size-fits-all lesson. Some students need assistance with word choice, while others struggle with structure and organization. Conferences and small-group instruction can help develop revision skills, but there is only a limited amount of instructional time. In truth, revision is like trying on a bathing suit—at some point you have to go into the changing room and put it on by yourself.

When students ask me what's the hardest part of writing, I answer, starting, getting it all out on paper—every last forced, dissatisfying word. My favorite part is the rewriting. It's more tedious and takes the longest, but there is something satisfying about cleaning up your work, putting a polish on it, making it shine.

I wrote *Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band* in two weeks, and it was a very rough draft. It took me six months after that to get it right, and I was very pleased with the outcome. *The Crossover* took me nine months to compose the first draft and about four more years of editing, rewriting, and peer review to get it in its final shape. I not only prefer rewriting to writing, but like Ms. Morrison, I love it. I think this has to do with the fact that I am a poet.

Poetry is a tool that can encourage and instill good revision habits. Poetry is usually short. The compactness of the genre allows students and teachers to read through the text several times and focus on specific aspects for improvement. It is much easier to read through a haiku or a short free-verse poem and make suggestions than it is to work through a two-page report. At the same time, in a poem, students can see almost immediately how revision can improve the quality and presentation of their work. Changing one word or including a line break can make quite a difference.

EXCERPT FROM "2 SHES"

I
start
ed
laughing obvicouldn't
ouslyhelp it why be
cause. (9–16)

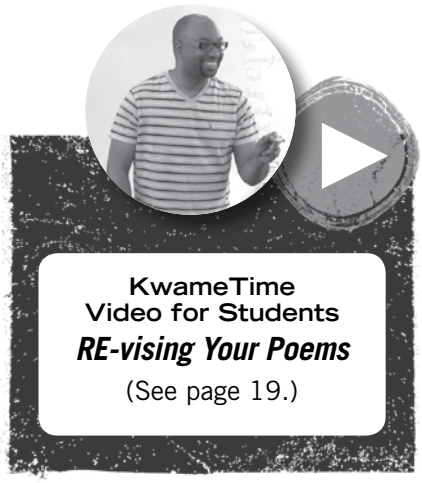
—e. e. cummings

In poetry, revision has some twists that are different from prose. For example, capitalization, spelling, and syntax matter until you read e. e. cummings. In the poem "2 shes," he joins unrelated words and splits words at the ends of lines.

Emily Dickinson frequently employed dashes to punctuate her poems instead of using periods and commas. She even applied capitals to words mid-sentence and not just at the beginnings of lines.

Purposeful Revision

Given the examples from Cummings and Dickinson, poetry revision is not a straightforward set of rules that can be listed on an anchor chart at the front of the classroom. The most important aspect of revising poetry is being purposeful. In my workshops, I tell students they are free to ignore capitalization, make up words, or skip punctuation, but they must have a reason and intent. This restriction allows students some flexibility to exercise their creativity, but it forces them to be purposeful in the application of unconventional practices.



KwameTime
Video for Students
RE-vising Your Poems
(See page 19.)

Line Breaks

Another twist to revising poetry involves the use of line breaks. In some cases, the rule is straightforward. A haiku has 5 syllables in the first line, 7 syllables in the second line, and 5 syllables in the last line. In other cases, the placement of line breaks is less obvious. Should each line express a complete thought or image? Should each line end with a rhyme? Or, should the poet employ enjambment—continuing a thought over two lines? The idea of purpose cannot be discarded when considering where a line break should occur.

Having said this, I am honest with students when talking about line breaks. Sometimes the line breaks are based on a rule as in haiku, sometimes they are based on complete thought or a rhyme, and sometimes they are just a feeling.

QUESTIONS for KWAME

When you're stuck how do you know how to turn it around and write?

When I have writer's block, I stop trying to turn it around. I just put it aside, and work on something else. And read. Or shoot hoops with my kid. Or listen to music. Or read other people's poetry for inspiration. And, it works. Eventually, I'll get unstuck and find my way back to it.

Lesson in Action

Helping Students Understand Line Breaks

One exercise to help students understand line breaks involves "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams. Begin by taking the original poem and rewriting it like prose:

> *So much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens.*

Then ask the students to add line breaks to turn the sentence into a poem. The lesson reinforces the idea that poetry is different from prose, and it also forces students to think about the application of line breaks. In the original poem, Williams has four stanzas of two lines. The second line in each stanza has two syllables, while the first lines switch between three and four syllables. After students have presented their work and you have examined the original, ask them to decide how Williams used line breaks. You might even reflect on which students were closest to Williams's original poem.

Another exercise to help students apply line breaks is an exercise called "The Power of Three." Simply put, write a poem (or revise an existing one) with only three words in each line. (See Chris Colderley's Solo Act on page 88.)

A third exercise is to have students study the same text shared as both prose and verse to determine how line breaks affect the power of a piece. In "A Shattered Wall," the student poet added key line breaks and formatting to increase the power of her words.

A SHATTERED WALL

Sometimes, I feel like my temper and I are standing on opposite sides of a glass wall. Every time I get annoyed, my temper punches the wall, and it cracks. A tiny crack, but enough to make it easier next time I get frustrated. Sometimes, after a lot of punching, the wall shatters. I can't prevent the wall from shattering, but I can pick up the pieces and build a new one.

—Kiley, 3rd grade

A SHATTERED WALL

Sometimes, I feel like my **TEMPER** and I
are standing on opposite sides
of a **glass wall**.
Every time I get **annoyed**,
my temper punches the wall, and it

c a k
r c s.

A tiny crack, but enough
to make it **easier** next time I get frustrated.
Sometimes, after a lot of punching, the wall

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s.

I can't **prevent** the wall from shattering,
but I can

up
pick ***the pieces*** and
build
a
new
one.

Sports Poems: Onomatopoeia

Overview

The relationship between poetry and sports goes back to ancient Greece. Pindar, for example, wrote odes in honor of Olympic athletes. In modern times, poets have continued this tradition by celebrating the modern sports of baseball and basketball, to name a few. Sports are filled with many sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures, which make sports a great subject for writing rich poetry.

Resources

- Alexander, K. (2014). *The Crossover*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- "Analysis of Baseball" by May Swenson
- "Casey at the Bat" by Ernest Lawrence Thayer
- "Foul Shot" by Edwin A. Hoey
- "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" by Yusef Komunyakaa

Lesson

1. Begin by reading "Dribbling" by Kwame Alexander.
2. Ask students to identify some of the features that make this poem unique.
    - Alexander uses visual elements to mimic some of the movements from basketball.
    - Alexander repeats the *–ing* sound throughout the poem to create rhythm, much like a bouncing ball.
    - Alexander uses onomatopoeia—words that imitate the sounds they describe—to recreate the atmosphere of basketball.
3. Make a list of words from sports that imitate the sounds they are describing.
4. Have students pick their favorite sports and identify examples of onomatopoeia from those sports.
5. Give students time to draft poems that describe sporting events using onomatopoeia.

Sports Poems: Onomatopoeia (cont.)

6. Students should choose interesting phrases and arrange them—chronologically, top to bottom, left to right, etc.—to highlight aspects of the sports.
7. When they are finished with their drafts, students may add elements to highlight the visual impacts of their poems.

Onomatopoeia Words

bam	clap	kerplunk	splosh
bang	clip clop	lub dub	swish
bash	crunch	moan	thud
boing	cuckoo	pow	thump
boink	ding	rumble	ugh
bong	grunt	rush	whizz
bonk	guffaw	slap	whoop
boo	gurgle	snort	whoosh
boo-hoo	hack	splash	zing
bump	hiss	splish	zoom