

The Poet-Brain

One poet says, “Sometimes, it’s an itch. A squiggle of sound deep down that won’t go away until I’ve scored words to the internal music I’m hearing.” Another says, “I want a challenge and so I set my intention: Can I write limerick or sonnet?”

Every poet’s poet-brain is open to being inspired by something the poet has read or observed or experienced. Or dreamed of.

The poet-brain is wired to sense metaphors and makes connections. The poet-brain is very curious. A poet plays with words. Therefore, it follows that the writing of poetry can be a playful, curious experience.

Using Activities to Tap into the Poet-Brain

- These Poetry Events work well with any group.
- In timed exercises, the intent is to get the writing down.
- As these are suggestions for thinking imaginatively and finding individual and authentic voice, they should not be done in rhyme.
- This time is free-form brainstorm think-tank time. At this point, all fear of spelling mistakes and notions of being wrong or right should be eliminated. This is first-draft writing.

Senses

Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. The five senses really are the secret to excellence in writing of authentic poetry.

- As prompts are given, complete each phrase by writing a response on a sheet of paper.

- The prompts will given very quickly at first.

Sensory Prompts

- As red as...
- As dark as...
- As cold as...
- As blue as...
- As hard as...
- As soft as...
- As slippery as...
- As hot as...
- As sour as...
- As sweet as...
- As stinky as...

- Once the list has been completed, give a show of hands to see how many wrote “as dark as night,” “as blue as the sky,” “as red as blood.” You will find an overwhelming number of similar answers.
- Discuss speed of writing and thinking. When forced to write too quickly, all writers tend to fall back on the easiest, most common idea.
- Discuss how it takes time to reach deeper and get to an original way of seeing. There are many kinds of red, or soft, or slippery.
- Go back to your first answers. For the most clichéd or common, think longer and deeper to see if you can come up with something surprising and uniquely yours.

Objective: This fill-in-the-blank exercise is one way of sharpening sensory awareness in any writer. Writers learn originality takes time, focus, and sustained concentration.

Result: Very often it is through the senses that a writer begins to see the uniqueness of his or her own voice, vision, perception.

What If...?

Imagination is not just a genetic trait possessed by people called poets. It is like a muscle. It can be located, exercised, and nurtured. It gets stronger and more supple, and gives surprising results!

- Write ten “What if...” sentences; e.g., *What if I were a cloud? What if it never snowed?*
- After ten minutes, a volunteer will read her or his ten sentences to the group. Can this be seen as a poem of sorts?
- Take one of your “What if...” questions and try to answer it in a free-verse poem. Write for five minutes.

Objective: This event illustrates to even the most reluctant poet that everyone does indeed have imagination.

Result: This exercise can be a wild romp in possibilities — the result is fun!

Personal Lists

- Make a list of the five most-important things in your life.
- Now pretend you are five years old. Make a list of your five most-important things.
- Pretend you are 88. List five most-important things.
- Pretend you are an animal. List five most-important things.
- Look at the lists. Are there things in common? Does the language change at all?
- Pick one thing from the first list; e.g., if “family” is on the list, pick one family member. Focus in, being as specific as possible. Write for five minutes write about that one thing.

Sample: My mother’s mother, my Nana, is seventy-two years old. She used to work as a nurse. Her favorite thing to do is play bridge and quilt and watch *Jeopardy* because she says it keeps your mind sharp. She comes every Sunday for dinner. She jokes that’s because my mother can’t make decent gravy. She is learning how to use the computer. She rocks.

- Work for five to ten minutes to shape your writing, editing as you go, experimenting with line length and rhythm.

Objective: To see how the writing goes from list to a jumble of new images.

Result: This is not a poem yet, but a *poem possibility*.

Portrait of A Grandmother

You won’t find my Nana rocking on any porch
But she rocks.
She might be at the gym swimming or lifting weights
Playing bridge, stitching up another quilt, emailing a friend.
She’s busy and never seems to rest. Not even Sundays.

Sundays, she comes to our place.
She can get every last lump out of the gravy.
She’s stubborn alright. Like me.

Once, she saved someone’s life
My mother told me Nana didn’t give up
But everyone else had.

I wonder if anyone one who passed my Nana
On the street would guess
That she’s a hero
And rocks. But not on any porch.