

Creative Writing Lesson Plan for 4th - 6th grades

Six local Pennsylvania poets participated in this creative writing project with 5th and 6th grades at Benjamin Rush Elementary School in Ben Salem, PA .in February/March 2009: Joanne Leva, Camille Norvaisas, Elizabeth Rivers, David Simpson, Wendy Steginsky and Bill Wunder.

Guide: *Rose, Where Did you Get that Red?* by Kenneth Koch

Using Koch's innovative ideas, this lesson plan is based on reading good poetry to children and suggesting an assignment based on those poems.

We agreed that we did not want the children's work to be constrained by rhyme so we chose unrhymed poetry as our starting point. David Simpson, Montgomery County Poet Laureate for 2007, suggested the main poem, "The Meadow Mouse", by Theodore Roethke. This poem was chosen with an eye to what the children have been studying since it fortunately refers to both an owl (previous 6th grade projects) and a wild baby (previous 5th grade projects). Their background information might help them write in interesting ways, we hoped. But you'll notice the assignment is quite broad and the children could choose other things to focus on if they wish. In fact, the majority of children did not write either about owls or wild babies.

Here's the ASSIGNMENT: Write a poem that asks an animal or other interesting object of your choice a question. You can have the animal answer the question or not as you wish. Come up with interesting, even crazy questions and answers. You may want to use some of the real facts you know. You may want to tell a story. You may want to invent a fantasy.

Day 1

40 minutes

The teacher or poet will briefly explain the goals: to write poetry, illustrate it, and share it. Perhaps it will be used for a bulletin board, a class book, publication on the Poetrywits web site, etc. The teacher/poet will answer a few questions, if any, explain the assignment and then move on to read *The Meadow Mouse*. Copies of the poem will be distributed for the students to look at while it's read out loud and discussed. The teacher or poet will also give out copies of student work that have been written for similar assignments (taken from Koch's book, especially poetry written after the first lesson) so they'll get an idea of what's expected. The focus will be on some techniques these authors use such as repetition, image, sound and humor.

20 minutes.

The students will have a chance to write their first version. The teacher/poet will encourage a relaxed atmosphere where the children can move around if they need to, talk quietly, look up information, ask questions one on one with us or the teacher.

Day 2

This hour is for revision and illustration. The teacher/poet may choose several interesting things that kids do to make their poems more varied if students want help or seem stuck. One strategy is to bring in more student poems, this time using colors and other language words to add to English. Again, examples are available in Koch's book.

Other ideas include using poems to show how to add more to a poem, to cut a poem and interchange parts for more interesting effects, to use similes and/or metaphors, the senses, word sounds, fantasy or cartoons. Children can write more poems and refer to new examples for ideas. Teachers/poets can continue to work one on one as needed.

Day 3

An hour for reading work and celebrating it. If local poets are helping in the class room they may wish to read one or two of their own poems or other poems that they think would be fun to share. Students may want to read other poems they enjoy in addition to their own work. Children don't have to read if they don't wish; teachers can read for them if a child prefers. Snacks and maybe picture taking of students in small groups holding up their work would be fun. This is a good time for any general questions to ask the poets or discuss related ideas the teachers would like to explore.

Poetrywits web site offers contests the students may enter as well as publication with parent's permission. The forms can be downloaded from this website. We hope teachers will encourage students to enter their work and facilitate publication by mailing in the permission slips and poems as a class project.

The strongest effect on the children's poetry, I thought, was from studying poems written by their peers. This made them comfortable to try their own work.

Thank you for reading this lesson plan I believe it could also be successfully used with 4th grade classes.

All of us felt stimulated, even thrilled, by the student response and support from the staff.

- Elizabeth Rivers, Montgomery County Poet Laureate, 2008