# CREATIVE WRITING: A SHORT GUIDE TO TEACHING IMAGINATIVE THINKING

**By Richard Jackson and Sybil Baker**

This year we are aiming to make the contest experience also a learning experience. To that effect we are providing the following guide. We will also hold a special informal workshop at UTC on **October 26, Saturday morning at 10 AM**, to run through a few basic ideas you might try. If you are interested, contact Dr. Richard Jackson at svobodni@aol.com for more information.

## POETRY

Much of what follows is based on the highly successful method begun by Kenneth Koch over 40 years ago and explained in his book *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Kids to Write Poetry* as well as our own experience in teaching creative writing at all levels. Ultimately we are aiming for more individuality than students all writing about, say, Thanksgiving or some other common subject. Koch sees the carryover from these exercises and the others here to student thinking and performance in other subjects is an added benefit.

### *STARTING AND EARLY LEVELS*

**LIST POEMS**

Koch begins by having students write a group poem in which they simply list "I wish I was…." and encourages them to "go crazy" with their wildest wishes. They might wish they were on a beach with their friends, on the moon or in a spaceship, sometimes more seriously in a place where they might see a grandparent who has passed. The idea is not to edit. Let anything they say go. He then puts together a bunch of these, collecting them randomly, to make a group poem. This is a good way to introduce the kind of imaginative leaps and connections that can result. And then there are variations—"Sometimes I wish" or " I used to wish," etc.

The next thing he does is introduce metaphor and simile. He encourages them to again say anything no matter how crazy it seems. Some examples he cites: "A breeze is like the sky coming to you" (4th grade); "The sea is like a blue coat" (4th grade); "rain on the roof is like someone typing or someone hammering;" "a cloud is like cotton candy;" "a cloud is like cotton candy" (4th and 5th grades).

Another warm up technique to loosen the students up is to play "Mad Libs" and let them see how different words bring whole different and exciting (and funny) associations.

Using those ideas he then goes on to give another exercise that has lines beginning "I dream…" again encouraging them to dream the wildest and most unusual things. This principle can then be applied to lots of sentence types to make basic poems: " I have…" or "I used to be…" or "I saw…." The idea is that these lists start to come together for a student and, even at a young age, they begin to understand, be conscious, of things about themselves. And it shows them how normally things that don't go together can go together to make something new in a poem. Students can then go on to more complex ideas such as ""If I were…**X** …then I would … **Y**…" (If I were snow I would fall on the ground and children would throw me back into the sky.." is how one 6th grader wrote this form.

### EXTENSIONS

The next step might be to extend these ideas. A student can pretend to be anything—one 4th grader wrote "I am the floor of a house. Every time someone steps on me I laugh…" and then went on to make a story about one incident. Another thing to try is to have a student imagine what it might be to be an animal like an elephant, or an object like a stone, or a river: generally, they begin with a favorite animal, plant, object or place.

Behind all of this is a sense of freedom. "I used to be a coke can / but now I am a goldfish/ I used to drink liquid/ but now I live in liquid." As you go on students can be encouraged to put a lot of these different types of poems together to make stories:

The sea is a green table.
My mother thinks I want to go swim.
My father thinks I want to build a castle.
If I were a shark I would swim past the sky.
If I were the sky I could go anywhere.
I would have my own world.
I would just say what I want.

As Koch has noted, often by the 6th grade students feel poetry is not for them and generally the problem is that most of what they read does not relate to their lives. But you can find some excellent examples in online poets like Gwendolyn Brooks and May Sarton, and others, as well as some anthologies by Koch himself.

## POETRY MIDDLE AND UPPER LEVELS

For one, most of the principles above can be used on upper grades and into high school but using more sophisticated types of language and thought. As students get older other subjects might present themselves: they might relate poems to things they read in a science, history or math class. One student wrote about one of the elements that only lives for a fraction of a second, and what he would do in that time (a variation on the "If I were.." poem from above). One French poet writes about geometric shapes. An 8th grader wrote the following using that model:

**The Line**
No one knows where it ends.
No one knows where it begins.
Sometimes I think I am a line
but not a straight one.
I want to curve around the whole
world in a circle that is me.

Another technique to use is imitation. The student chooses a poem you give them from a group and then copies its pattern, then moves away from it:

**Gwednolyn Brooks**
**Bean Eaters**

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.

And remembering . . .
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that
is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths,
tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

### Strict Imitation (stanza 1 only)

They eat paper mostly, this old worn couple.
Breakfast is a quick thing..
paper plates sometimes on the floor,
Plastic spoons.

### Breakaway Poem based on above (stanza 1 only)

If I were paper they would probably eat me.
The kitchen is dark with no electricity.
We go outside to eat.
Not much but better than paper.

Here the student has taken an idea implicit in the original and developed it building a scene, and using the first person to insert himself and make the poem more relevant to him. Imitation is actually the oldest form of learning to write poetry—how writers from Horace to Petrarch to Pope to Frost and so on began.

**ANOTHER IDEA**: If you want to try more exercises of your own invention, which we encourage, check out the *Academy of American Poets* web page. But also, try some of them yourself so you can anticipate some of the issues that might arise with your own students. If you have fun and start imagining in new ways, they will, and it will affect all their school work.

## MORE IDEAS GEARED TOWARDS OLDER STUDENTS: USING WRITING PROMPTS FOR POEMS

Koch' book, *ROSE,WHERE DID YOU GET THAT RED?* focuses more on reading and writing in response. This can be very useful for older students, especially at the high school level. He begins with ten "lessons" where students read famous poems and write a poem in response or in imitation of it. he starts with William Blak'es "The Tyger" and suggests students write a poem addressing an animal. "Dog, where did you get that bark? / Dragon where did you get that flame" begins a fourth grader. "Oh mole, what makes you stay in the ground? / Why do you eat the soil?" begins a tenth grader.

"Thirteen ways of looking at a Blackbird" is the title of a Wallace Stevens poem, "Five Ways of Looking at a Cloud" begins a seventh grader—marsh mellow, dove, rabbit—even his grandmother's ball of yarn figure in his poem.

William Carlos Williams is another good model: he has a number of short poems about domestic life. Williams "This is just to say," The locust tree in flower," and "Between Walls" were used very successfully. The first of these is an apology poem. "Dear Dog/ please / forgive / me / for/ eating / your / dog / biscuit" writes a sixth grader.

The second half of this book is an anthology of famous poems to use as prompts and student responses. In response to Shakespeare's "Shall I compare the to a summer's day" a student might begin "Shall I compare thee to the ocean? / No, your eyes are deeper and more beautiful" a student might write in imitation.

Read Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and write about some dreamy, mysterious place where you are all powerful.

Read Marianne Moore's "The Wood Weasel" and write a poem about an animal you like but no one else seems to like.

Read a native American poem and write a poem in praise of one of the things in the natural world (trees, rivers, mountains, etc)

Read a Psalm and write a poem asking for protection.

Read Herrick's "Delight in Disorder" and write about how you like your room messy.

Read a love poem and write one about your own feelings about someone.

The idea here is to use work from a literature class and have students write in imitation or response as a way to understand, from an author's point of view, what it is like to create something. It will also result in better readers. It is a good idea to have students exchange ideas. Let students comment but emphasize the positive, and don't criticize any response. The idea here is to keep students on an imaginary journey. Sometimes students will write a poem working off of what another student did.

Students can even respond to the work of others by writing a question and answer pair of poems in tandem: "How High does the sky reach?" one student begins, but another begins her answer with" It's not high but deep because it's inside you/ the way it is reflected in the water" stats the answer by the other student high school student.

Koch suggest that all the writing be done *in class*. One strange exercise is that you have students write about a topic (from an animal or object's point of view often works best) and then here and there write a word on the board or say it aloud and the students have to incorporate it into their poem (a variation of mad libs).

I guess the final point is that following the procedure, adapted for your grade level, in the STARTING section (use of formula, group writes, metaphor and simile, imagining you are something else, *etc.*) should be everyone's starting point. A couple of days doing that will generally get students warmed up to the idea (and for older students break down some barriers from learned fears about poetry or just plain shyness). Then move towards combining these ideas, and for later students, using prompts from their reading.

It is a good idea, if you have time, to spend a day or two workshopping student work—letting other students comment by telling what they liked and what they would like to hear more about. That, in itself, can act as a prompt as well s encouragement.

The main difference between this section and the prose section is that students write in lines. It is important at this point not to be technical about that. A line break is a slight pause, a hesitation, like someone thinking aloud, so it emphasizes what happens, the word or words, at the end of the line. It generally focuses less on the story line on more on the language. If it tells a story at this level it tells only the main points that relate to emotions or discoveries as opposed to the fuller treatment in a story. The language is generally more musical—but don't emphasize the sing-songish heavily metered poems unless a student is inclined that way.

# FICTION

**Most of the principles and ideas from the poetry section apply here**: it is important first to loosen students up and make the idea of writing a story fun. Beginning with students writing ideas for stories and exchanging those ideas in small groups helps—often students will suggest further development by asking "What happens next?" or "What if_____?" Students can extend ideas like "I used to be a…" into more elaborate fictions emphasizing strange and unexpected events, some suggested by other students. The aim here is to get students out of their ordinary experiences and to free up and stretch their imaginations.

Younger students might want to extend or play off of stories they see on TV, maybe take a characters point of view. An interesting exercise is: take a famous character (TV, historical, from news) and place him or her in an unlikely situation to see what happens (a cartoon character suddenly finds itself in your room, or in your class; George Washington visits your birthday party; Einstein gets lost in your neighborhood). This allows the student a starting point—what he or she knows about the character—and then allows them to imagine unlikely plot lines.

Another exercise for students: place yourself in an unlikely place (for example, another historical time, another planet, Italy, the top of a mountain) or in another role (as captain of a ship, a police officer, as a politician). What would you say or do? Would you change as a person? Would you act as others expect? What does the place look like—offer some details that let the reader *feel* what it is like (think of similes and metaphors from the poetry section)—what does the pavement or grass feel like, are the walls splotchy or clean, is it cold? think of writing the description as a kind of photo. If it's a role, how did you get in that position? are you comfortable? who is watching you, counting on you, for or against you?

A good way to think about stories is to look at one of the "Flash Fiction" or "Sudden Fiction" anthologies. These generally run anywhere from a paragraph to 1000 words or so. Try to have the plot of the student's story have a conflict. One way to prompt this is to ask, "But what if_____" and have a peer help with the tory by putting up an impediment that the writer then has to find a way to overcome. This works even at the primary grade levels as well as high school levels. By continuing to ask questions a plot can unfold in unexpected directions.

A good exercise to understand point of view is to have students describe a scene from two pints of view (say and old person and a young one, or a sad person and a happy one). What do they focus on that is different? What conclusions do they draw? What kinds of adjectives do they use?

## Further Notes on Writing Fiction

I've noticed there aren't many good books about writing short literary fiction. (There are plenty on writing thrillers, fantasy, science fiction, even mainstream novels.) At one point, I thought I might write one myself, but the literary-fiction writers I work with don't often read books about writing, though they do better than that: they read literary fiction voraciously.
Here are a few of the things they do that they find profitable:

Copy out sections or whole stories they love. (It's "play and mastery"—we know it as children, as we know joy and passion in creative work, though we often block it as adults)

- Slapdash-outline stories they want to learn from. (Harry Crews, for instance, copied out longhand and outlined all of the novels of Graham Greene, and F. Scott Fitzgerald imitated a different famous writer every six months in his 20's.)
- Hemingway's favorite exercise—which was to take a favorite scene from another writer's novel, try to recreate it in words as close as possible to the original, and compare the two versions. Every writer I've ever known who's tried this has been blown away by it. You learn instantly, among many other things, whether you're an underwriter or over-writer, a visual writer or an audial one, and have an ear for dialogue or prefer summarizing speech.
- Writer's exercises. As an exercise, "write some dialogue" does nothing, really—certainly not dramatically or by way of character-revelation under pressure. On the other hand, "Write a dialogue scene with minimal exposition where two people are arguing, but we have no idea about what, and we have to play deceptive in a major way to figure it out" has success built into it—just as "write about something cute and innocent and very safe, but with a subtle, threatening feel—an undercurrent of horror to it"—does. Two of my favorites, passed down to me years ago through the writer's grapevine, are "The Black Unicorn" and "Fairytale for an Imaginary Child." Anyone who'd like to see these need simply email me through my website and say, "Send those two writer's exercises." And on and on.

I continue to be stunned by how well these things work. But why should I be stunned? This is how artists have always learned their craft—studying other great work. Young writers are afraid they'll lose their voices, themselves, to the apprenticeship, but that's just not possible when one chooses the works to emulate out of love.
One of the greatest threats to young writers are these neo-romantic notions of what it means to be a writer:

- I'm a born writer, therefore don't do exercises (how beneath me)
- What lands on the page is art (either the reader gets it or doesn't)
- I certainly don't want to embrace another's writing, even if I love it, because I might lose my originality. (Only in the US—because of cultural American myths—do writers fear being "over influenced" by what for millennia artists have viewed simply as their craft apprenticeships.)