

GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

**LITERACY****Teaching Poetry With Student Exemplars**

Poetry can feel inaccessible to teens, but using examples written by former students as mentor texts brings it within reach.

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At the beginning of the school year, the junior and senior students in my creative writing classes often struggle and feel intimidated; they don't identify as poets. Nevertheless, my goal is for each student to enjoy the power of poetry, as both a reader and a creator.

I set that goal because I believe that *poetry improves ideas and is therapeutic* (<https://www.writersdigest.com/whats-new/8-reasons-why-poetry-is-good-for-the-soul>), and that it has *emotional and cognitive benefits* (<https://www.kveller.com/seven-reasons-why-kids-should-read-poetry/>): It increases language abilities, helps students pay attention to detail, builds empathy, and improves creativity and analytical skills.

## INSPIRING THROUGH EXAMPLE

I have been inspired by *Margaret Sarsfield* (<https://scholarworks.rit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1202&context=jcws>) of Ohio State University, who wrote, “If poetry is to be understood as a living art, it is vital that students [be] allowed to engage with contemporary poets, many of whom will bear more resemblance to the American student.”

I use award-winning poems written by young people as my mentor texts. To find contemporary poets, I read literary journals and look at poetry competition winners. I’ve found that my students relate to poems written by peers more than poems from the traditional canon.

In fact, the poets whose work I share most are my current and former students. This allows students to see themselves in poetry, to realize that they too can write successfully.

The editor of *Spellbound: The Art of Teaching Poetry*, Matthew Burgess, says, “For some young writers, the published poem can feel remote or intimidating. But when you read a poem that an actual student wrote in response—someone just like you—suddenly a light goes on and the energy quickens.” I’ve found this to be true in my classroom.

I share, read, and analyze poems from both national and local publications and competitions, including the *Sejong Cultural Society*

(<http://sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/current/sijo.php>)'s *sijo* competition, *Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets* (<https://www.wfop.org/annual-contests>), *Neuroscience for Kids Poetry Contest* (<https://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/contest20.html>), and *The Skinny Poetry Journal* (<https://theskinnypoetryjournal.wordpress.com/>), among others.

## USING EXEMPLARS BY FORMER STUDENTS

Some of the most successful student exemplars are about experiences: the mundane, the ironic, the entertaining, the personal. When students read poems about relatable topics, they realize that their passions and experiences can inspire their own work.

*Sijo*, a Korean form of poetry, is similar to haiku in that it is also divided into lines and syllables. The Sejong Cultural Society hosts *an annual sijo competition* (<http://sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/current/sijo.php>) in collaboration with the Korean Institute at Harvard University. Several of my students have been recognized in the competition and awarded publication and monetary prizes.

To begin my *sijo* unit, I share the work of recent student winners. After reading *sijo*, my students and I analyze each and consider why it might have been selected. Students also note topic choices and get ideas for their own pieces.

Here is one winning *sijo* that students have enjoyed:

Family Arguments (Kaitlyn Laufenberg, 12th grade)

*My grandpa hosts a cramped Christmas, with four kids and six grandkids.  
When they visit, fourteen strong voices bicker at one another.  
In silence, Grandpa smiles. Everyone he loves is here.*

After reading Kaitlyn's poem, students note how she used sentences, characters, and emotion—and how these made her poem easy to understand. They then reflect on their own family traditions and relationships, searching for potential themes for their own work.

I encourage students to be clever in addition to using stylistic devices. When I share the next sijo, I ask students to consider how the author used humor and surprise.

Belated Breakfast (Toni Smith, 11th grade)

*One cup of coffee ready to pour.  
Two pieces of wheat toast to eat.  
Three spreads of grape jelly.  
Four minutes to get ready.  
Cat steals my toast, then spills my coffee.  
Now, I'm five minutes late.*

My students note that Toni cleverly uses numbers to drive her story. In the fifth line, Toni's twist breaks the numerical structure as well as her story line.

The next poem I share was written by a former student who is an ardent baseball fan and player.

Season That Never Comes (Bryce Toussaint, 12th grade)

*I lace up stiff metal cleats,  
jog yellow foul pole to foul pole,  
strap on rugged batting gloves,  
and take ground balls off the infield turf.*

*But it's still minus four outside—  
forty two days till first pitch.*

First I ask the students who the poem might be about. Although some students guess Bryce, I ask who else the poem could be about—how Bryce cleverly hints at another character. I often have one baseball fan who realizes that 42 (the number of days until the first pitch) was Jackie Robinson's number. I then ask students to discuss what Bryce's title and his reference to a freezing temperature might have to do with Robinson's baseball career. After reading this poem, students come to consider how they might weave history or a message into their own poems.

## PUTTING IT TOGETHER

By the end of our time together, my students not only realize that their voices are worthy of celebration and publication but also begin to identify as writers and poets—and to enjoy poetry more.

After reading and analyzing student-written poems, students realize they too can have their poems published and shared in future classes.

## SHARE THIS STORY



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