

IN AND OUT OF CONTEXT: A POETRY WRITING WORKSHOP
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GOALS: To teach children that they can find ideas for their own poems and stories in existing works of literature; to show children that people perceive meaning in different ways and have different points of view.

TEACHER PREPARATION

1. Find six children's poems, rich in imagery, evocative in tone, and reasonably short (30 lines and under, depending on the age of your students). Number the poems 1-6. Workable poets include Valerie Worth, Myra Cohn Livingston, Lee Bennett Hopkins, Doug Florian, Joyce Sidman.
2. Type the numbered poems and make a set of the poems for each child. (You may be able to fit all on one 2-sided page.) Hold sets until the end of the workshop.
3. Take lines of poetry "out of context." Select an evocative, action-filled or humorous stanza (or several lines) from each poem. Type the lines at the top of separate sheets of writing paper. (You should have six sheets, numbered 1-6 to correspond with the whole poems.) Copy these sheets so that every student gets one. E.g. In a class of 24, four students will get the same lines of poetry to work on. (It's okay if there's an odd amount.)
4. Write the following questions on the board: What action is going on and what might happen next? Is there a character? What is the character feeling? How do the lines make you feel? Do the lines remind you of anything or another person?

WORKSHOP

1. Distribute the sheets, ask the students not to compare yet. Have students read the lines to themselves several times.
2. Ask them to begin a poem inspired by the lines. They can use the lines in any part of the poem, or not at all. (Since this is a creative thinking exercise, please don't pressure the students to "finish" the poem within a short time period. They can be encouraged to complete it at home or during the

next writing session.) You may also want to tell them that they will be expected to share their writing with the class, so not to write anything they'd feel uncomfortable about.

3. For peer and group review, group students so that everyone in the group has different lines (use numbers to sort).
4. After two rounds of revision, ask all those who had lines numbered "1" to read what they've begun. Feel free to give suggestions on revising or expanding. Proceed through 6. Note aloud the difference among poems inspired by the same lines.
5. Distribute sets of numbered poems and have children find the whole poems their lines correspond to. Ask them to read the poems silently (or choose students to read aloud). Discuss the differences in meaning, tone, action, etc. of their poems and the poet's poem. Discuss the meanings of the specific lines they used "out of context" versus the meanings of the lines "in context" the poet intended.

EXAMPLE:

Lines out of context

New context: Pegi's poem

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Daring every so
Often to stop
And sink a well
In the soft pink
Soil, hoping
To draw up a
Hasty drop, and
drink, and survive... | Dry again.
My skin cracks
like the desert
beneath my feet.
My tongue sands
the sides of my mouth.
Eyelids stick
closed. |
|--|--|

Original Context

1. FLEAS, by Valerie Worth (from ALL THE SMALL POEMS)

Roaming these
Furry prairies,
Daring every so
Often to stop
And sink a well
In the soft pink
Soil, hoping
To draw up a

Hasty drop, and
drink, and survive,

There's always
The threat of those
Inexplicable storms,
When over the hairy
Horizon rages
A terrible paw:
Descending to
Rend the ground,
While we scramble
Away for our lives.

FUN VARIATION!

Take one poem, and distribute six (or four) sets of different lines!