Poetry Lesson Plan: Poem of Instruction / Framing a Poem

Grades: 5-12 > College Level

Objective — The student will:
  • write a free-verse poem based on providing an "instruction" (direction)
  • utilize the skill of providing detailed instructions
  • learn to explore for and/or identify opportunities to create poems from simple, everyday verbal or written instructions. (Ex. How to Bake Bread, How to Walk to School)
  • become aware of everyday language that has merit as poetry.
  • exercise decision in creating line breaks and the placement of appropriate "first words" at the beginning of lines in "rebuilding" the instructions into a recognizable poetry form.

Hint: For lower grades consider writing short, simple instructions in paragraph form. Then ask your students to separate the lines and words into a 10 line poem. See Example #1 Below

Poem of Instruction / Framing a Poem

Write a poem which satisfies all of the following criteria:

1. The poem reads like a set of instructions.

2. The poem describes an activity which you know well, something most people are familiar with, but

3. Instead of giving the reader literal instructions, you are trying to capture in words the feel of the activity by:

   a. Hitting the reader with surprising metaphors and similes
   
   b. Selecting a few details which comprise the essence of the experience

   c. Incorporating details which, though seemingly unimportant or unspectacular, are actually part of the hidden lore of the activity: (For example, if you were writing about how to get through a boring class you might recall things like deliberately making one leg go to sleep or crossing your eyes; if you were describing a snowball fight, you might talk about the moment when a harmless snowball begins to become an "ice-ball.")

4. The poem must not be end-rhymed.

5. The poem must be titled.
EXAMPLE 1

How to Eat a Cookie  
(in paragraph form)

Go to the store and find some Oreos. Buy them and put them in a sack. Then go home and get some milk, sit down at the table and eat them. Dip them in the milk first.

Rewrite in poem form.

How to Eat a Cookie

Go to the store and find some Oreos. Buy them and put them in a sack. Then go home and get some milk, sit down at the table and eat them. Dip them in the milk first.

EXAMPLE 2

How to Play Night Baseball

A pasture is best, freshly mown so that by the time a grounder’s plowed through all that chewed, spit-out grass to reach you, the ball will be bruised with green kisses. Start in the evening. Come with a bad sunburn and smelling of chlorine, water still crackling in your ears. Play until the ball is khaki—a moveable piece of the twilight—the girls’ bare arms in the bleachers are pale, the heat lightning jumps in the west. Play until you can only see pop-ups and routine grounders get lost in the sweet grass for extra bases.

-- Jonathan Holden

Continue the lesson by asking your students to come up with and write their own personal set of instructions in poetry form. With older students, expect more complex instructions.
EXAMPLE 3

Stealing the Christmas Greens

Fifty miles down the road you can give five bucks to some guy with a thread-riddled nose like a road map of Vermont and get a symmetrical tree. Not me. Third growth pine is best, where sand farmers have failed and where it was recut to fire a try-works in whaling days. A broken puzzle of snow on the ground, wear a coat long enough to bootleg in a saw. This bottom as Ned McLaughlin's, those mounds are where he spaded his dead horses. Look close and you might see a wicket of ribs stick up like a rotting skiff. Now look for a tree whose northeast side isn't flat with wind off George's Bank. Be sure to top it high and light enough so you can drag it back. Keep off the roads, or if you really have to move, being seen, balance it easily over one shoulder. It's more than likely once you set it up you'll see the top won't point, but forks, imperfect as a life, no pinnacle for an angel. A green bow and a chocolate Santa Claus dressed in red foil will camouflage that gray spot on the trunk. Now plug it in, no talk of ritual, get out the bourbon (each sip's Christmas Eve), and rinse a glass clean --Brendan Galvin

Example 4

How to Bake Bread

You must believe in the yeast. Faith is the beginning of leavening.

Be distant, but careful, with the eggs. An egg speaks only to other egg, but complains loudly to the entire dough if you break a yoke before its time.

Shortening must be persuaded to take part. You have to push it from the spoon. Even then it clings to the hand.

Explain the scalding to the milk. Pain is easy when the reason is clear.

Kiss the sugar quickly; it is eager to lose itself in the milk.

Speak kindly to the flour. One good word is worth the sifting, eases the stiffness of the stirring.

You can depend on the salt, it you don't forget it. Toss it in over your shoulder for luck.

Give a gentle hand to the kneading. Let the dough know your palm; it will remember your touch in the final shaping.

Find it some warmth for the rising and an hour's peace. The baking is its own reward. -- Elizabeth Banset
Example 5

For Brothers Everywhere

There is a schoolyard that runs from here to the dark's fence where brothers keep goin to the hoop, keep risin up with baske'balls ripe as pumpkins toward rims hung like piñatas, pinned. like thunderclouds to the sky's wide chest an' everybody is spinnin an' bankin off the glass, finger-rollin off the glass with the same soft touch you'd give the head of a child, a chile witta big-ass pumpkin head, who stands in the schoolyard lit by brothers--postin up, givin, gain, taking the lane, flashin off the pivot, dealin behind the back, between the legs. cockin the rock an' glidin like mad hawks--swoopin black with arms for wings, palmin the sun, throwin it down, and even with the day gone, without even a crumb of light from the city, brothers keep runnin-gunnin, fallin away takin fall-away j's from the comer; their bodies like muscular saxophones body-boppin better than jazz, beyond summer, beyond weather, beyond everything that moves--an' with one shake, they're pullin-up from the perimeter, shakin-bakin, brothers be sweet pullin-up from the edge a' the world, hangin like air itself hangs in the air; an' gravidy gotta giv'em.up: the ball burning like a fruit with a soul in their velvet hands, while the wrists whisper backspin, an' the fingers comb the rock once--givin it up, lettin it go, letting it go like good news because the hoop is a well, a well with no bottom, an' they're fillin that sucker up!

-- Tim Seibles