

**L535: Library Services
for Children and Young Adults**
Spring, 2003
Sarah Wright, Instructor

**Planned Program 2:
Teen Poetry Workshop**

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I. Context

I had the great good fortune to be asked by a friend of mine who lives in Paoli, Indiana, if I would help her organize a poetry workshop with her friend Carol Thornton-Anderson in the neighboring town of French Lick, Indiana. Carol happens to be the Director and Youth Services Librarian for the Melton Public Library. I will write this program plan as if I were Carol.

I am the Director and Youth Services Librarian for Melton Public Library in French Lick, Indiana. Melton is a small library in a largely rural (and poor) county in the southern part of the state. We recently managed to pull off a major library renovation, completed last year, which doubled the size of the library. We were able to create a well-appointed Young Adult section, and also established a new community Meeting Room.

For several years during National Poetry Month in April, I have helped run a poetry contest for the students of Springs Valley Junior/Senior High School, collaborating with the English faculty there (one of whom happens to be my husband). There are two divisions: grades 7-9, and 10-12; the two first-place winners each receive a \$50 savings bond, donated by local businesses. The winners are announced on Awards Day at the school in mid-May. There are usually ten to fifteen entries submitted. This year's deadline for entries is May 5.

This year we wanted to do something both to stir up interest in the contest and support students in their writing, and a friend of mine offered to help me organize a poetry workshop. She then recruited a friend of hers who is an MLS student at Indiana University, about an hour's drive away. After e-mailing back and forth, the three of us met one Saturday afternoon in March to set a date for the workshop and brainstorm ideas.

Our workshop will be held on Tuesday, April 22nd, as an after-school event. We chose a Tuesday because the library has its latest hours on that day (closing at 7:00), leaving us the most time for writing if the program goes well. We chose the relatively late date in order to 1) give us time to prepare; 2) allow me to return from the ILF conference April 14-16 prior to the workshop; 3) have the workshop close enough to the deadline that it might prompt additional entries (rather than being forgotten as something due "weeks from now"), but far enough from the deadline to leave time for additional writing and revising.

While we don't have the staff at the library to run a regular poetry group, we would be more than happy to offer space and advice to a group of teens who want to meet and continue to support each other's writing. If this one-time poetry workshop sparks that kind of interest, or leads to that kind of desire, it will have succeeded to the utmost.

II. Objectives/Rationale

A. Support the Poetry Contest

This workshop will both promote the upcoming contest and encourage additional entries, contributing to the success of that library program.

B. Encourage young writers

The workshop will build both skills and confidence for those who attend. This supports the Melton Public Library mission “to provide a learning atmosphere in which the patron has the opportunity to explore his/her individual values and goals and to build his/her own self-esteem and personal worth.” The attention of adults who set aside time to focus on developing the teens’ gifts also makes an important difference, sending the message that the library cares about their talents and abilities.

C. Connect young people with poetry and literature

Keeping young people engaged with the library, and with reading, is the key to maintaining a user base into the future. Today’s High School students are tomorrow’s tax-payers and (hopefully) library users. Getting these kids excited about poetry, and making the library the source of that excitement, meets the objective of developing the library’s importance in their lives.

D. Develop emotional literacy through poetry

Writing poetry normally requires a focusing of feeling, a way of “getting it out”. Expressing one’s feelings through poetry—learning how to make them take solid form, learning how to look at them and learning how to talk with them and about them—builds skills that are particularly essential in adolescence, when emotions can be intense and unpredictable. Poetry is an important outlet and important discipline for learning how to understand and manage those unruly feelings.

E. Foster community goodwill

After-school programs that encourage kids and give them positive outlets for their energy are always welcome, especially in communities with few resources. This workshop presents the library as a place that welcomes teens and fosters their gifts.

III. Target Age Group

1. **Age:** 12-18 (Junior and Senior High School).
 - **Characteristics:** The four developmental goals of adolescence include gaining independence, seeking excitement, establishing identity, and building acceptance. Peer relations play a defining role, as teens become simultaneously self-conscious to a high degree, and deeply concerned with what others think of them (all part of establishing identity). Adolescent energy levels and tendency to move in groups can give tired adults the impression of too much noise and disruption (and can cause real disruption if not handled with firm good will). That same energy, however, fuels a high level of volunteerism and commitment to making a difference. Teens desire and deserve respect for their abilities and their growing adult competencies—and also need friendly adult support and encouragement in exercising those skills. Perhaps more than any other age group, young adults’ behavior is often largely attuned to the expectations

- they feel from those around them, particularly adults. It is therefore critical that those working with adolescents express positive expectations of their abilities and offer positive opportunities for growth.
2. **Time:** After school (3:15), continuing up to library closing (7:00) if sufficient interest. The actual program will begin by 4:00, allowing 30-45 minutes for eating and socializing.
 3. **Setting:** Melton Public Library Meeting Room.
 4. **Projected Attendance:** 10-20.

IV. Staff/Personal Involvement

I am the only library staff member involved with this program. The two volunteers are preparing most of the program materials and will be helping run the event. My time commitment extends to email communications and two or three face-to-face planning meetings of two to three hours each. I will also coordinate with the schools and deliver publicity materials prepared by the volunteers.

Estimated time spent in planning and preparation: 10 hours. Estimated time spent on day of program: 5 hours.

Total estimated hours: 15.

V. Estimated Costs

- **Librarian time:** \$330 (15 hours x approx. \$22./hr)
- **Materials:** Estimated costs: \$5. I will draw on the library's supply of small items for door prizes, such as "jingle jot" pens (bulk price approximately 30 cents each). Pizza and drinks will be donated by Chicago's Pizza, a long-time supporter of student activities. Workshop materials not supplied by the volunteers may be purchased with money from the YA section's soda machine, which is earmarked for YA programs.
- **Publicity:** Total estimated costs: \$22, broken down as follows:
 - Photocopying: approx. \$0 (provided by volunteer)
 - Librarian time for publicity: \$22 (approx. 1 hour to deliver flyers and communicate with teachers)
- **Grand Total Estimated Costs: \$357.00**

VI. Publicity Plan

One of the volunteers has prepared three flyers featuring poetry by teens, which I will give to the teachers to be distributed in class. Beginning three weeks before the workshop, one set of flyers will be distributed to the classrooms each week. A poem by Tupac Shakur was chosen for the first flyer, to capitalize on the popularity of his poetry collection and to defuse any "girly" perceptions of poetry-writing. The flyers were designed to fit three on an 8 1/2 x 11" page in landscape view, cut down so as to be jumbo bookmark size. Starting three weeks ahead of time, and reinforcing the message every week leading up to the

workshop, should keep the program fresh in the students' minds as the date approaches.

Students will be encouraged to bring poetry with them to the workshop—either something they've written, or something they like. Reading it aloud at the workshop will be entirely optional. This feature of the program will not be printed on the flyers, but will be told in the classroom and the library.

Especially in a small community like this, word of mouth and face-to-face interaction go a long way to extend the power of conventional publicity.

Unfortunately, we discovered too late that the Spring Valley High School Academic Team is holding a meet on the day of our program. This will probably cut into our attendance from our most likely participants; at least one student has already expressed regret about not being able to come.

VII. Program Procedures

A. Introduction (30-45 minutes)

Students come across the street to the library after school lets out at 3:15. After 30-45 minutes of eating and "hang time", one of the volunteers will informally convene the workshop by standing and reading the teen-written poem, "My Heart Is in My Throat" (see Appendix for text).

B. Setting the Stage (30-45 minutes)

1. Tear out page An old book will be passed to the students, and each person will be told to tear out a page from the book. If we have a large turnout, we will divide them into groups of two or three, and each group will tear a page. We will not tell them what the page is for. ☺

2. "What is poetry?" (time: 15-20 minutes)

a) *Quotations* A hollow ball filled with folded strips of paper will be thrown or rolled from student to student. Each person will draw out a strip of paper, and read what is printed on it: a quote about poetry (see attached list of quotes). If there is a large turnout, this activity will be cut short as it gets tedious (we do not intend to use all 18 quotes—it's just good to have a mix). The quotes will be taped to poster board to display in the room (including the ones not read).

b) *Brainstorm* After hearing these quotes, the group will throw out their own ideas about what poetry is, does, and is for. If the students don't make these points themselves, the adults will bring up the music of language (the interplay of sound, rhythm, and unexpected meanings), imagery, feelings and ideas, and the fact that it doesn't have to rhyme (beware the Hallmark Card Syndrome).

3. Read poems brought to session (time: 15-25 minutes) Now we'll get some examples in the air, and talk about poetic principles in action. The students will have been encouraged to bring poems with them to the workshop, but are not required to read aloud. The adults will bring poetry to share, such as Nikki Giovanni's "I Wrote a Good Omelet" (see Appendix for text). The qualities of each poem will be briefly discussed (such as how the "mismatched" language in the Giovanni poem creates an effective and humorous image of the

discombobulation sometimes brought on by love). We will close this time with a 2-person reading of Paul Fleischman's "Honeybees", read by the two adult volunteers (see photocopy, attached).

C. Writing Exercises (approx. 90 minutes, depending on students)

We will have in hand a broad selection of exercises, and will tailor the exercises done to the nature and disposition of the group. We will prepare more material than we expect to be able to cover. Each exercise will take approx. 15 minutes, plus another 5-10 minutes to discuss. For example:

1. Torn page poem

Each person or team starts from the page torn out of the book. They then draw a number out of a jar or hat, and use that number to count down line by line from the top of the page to land on a specific line. They then draw another number, and starting on that same line count in left to right, word by word. The word landed on is the first word of the poem they will now write.

We may make it somewhat easier on them by giving them an additional focus for the poem, such as saying that it must also include the words "tear", "page", and "book", or that it must be about something they did or thought about today.

We will begin with the torn page poem. The remaining exercises are listed here in no particular order.

2. First line provided

Given the first line of a published poem, write the rest yourself. Examples: "When Susanna Jones wears red" (Langston Hughes); "Remember me when I am gone away" (Christina Rossetti); "I'm a riddle in nine syllables" (Sylvia Plath).

3. Picture poem

Write a poem based on what you see in a picture. We will have a poster of a painting such as "Nighthawks" or Seurat's "La Grand Jatte" in the room for them to work from.

4. List poem

List and briefly describe a set of things that follow a certain theme, such as "Things that grow" (don't have to be living things—feelings grow, debt or a bank account grows, silence grows, etc.) or "Reasons I'll give to not do homework" or "Places I've been".

5. Found poem

In this case: write a poem about a (visible) article of clothing or jewelry that you are wearing—where it came from, what it makes you think of, what you like about it, why you wore it today, etc. This could be a "list" poem, where you list its qualities/associations.

6. Memory poem

Crystallize a feeling or image from a particular moment or event in your life. We could limit this to a specific time period, such as elementary school, or time of year, such as summer.

7. Poster poem

Create a set of sentences around a certain theme, such as Friendship or Travel or Nightfall. Arrange the sentences on the page so that they can be read in any order, or write them on separate pieces of paper and post them with tape or on a magnet so that they can be moved around.

8. The Free-Lance Muse

Imagine you are a free-lance muse, looking for work. Lately you've been having to take any job you could get, trying to inspire an ad executive or a political speechwriter. You're tired of it, and now you want a real poet. Write a job description for the poet whose creative flame you would most like to spark.

9. Letter poem

Think of someone you would like to say something to, and write a poem as if it were a letter addressed to that person. It doesn't have to be someone you know now; it could be a childhood friend who moved away, or your dog, or a family member who lives far from here, or someone you care about who has died. What do you want to tell them? What do you want to ask them?

10. Place poem

Write a poem that describes a particular place, such as your bedroom, your grandmother's kitchen, or a favorite spot by the lake. Try to capture the sounds and smells and textures of the place as well as what it looks like, and try to mix in how it makes you feel. Someone who reads this poem should understand what this place means to you, and should be able to picture it clearly.

11. Word List Swap poem

In groups of two, each person writes down five unrelated words. There must be at least one noun, one verb, and one adjective in the list (e.g., calculate, blanket, sly, vigorous, joy). Swap lists with your partner, and write a poem that includes those five words. Play nice: words can be messy, but let's not get dirty.

D. Conclusion (10-15 minutes)

1. 4-person reading of Paul Fleischman's "Ghosts' Grace"

We will have to recruit at least one volunteer from the students in order to read this vivid poem of ghosts watching a family eating a meal, the mortals entirely unaware of the lost pleasures such a gathering represents to the unseen audience (see photocopy, attached). With any luck, the students will want to give it a try on their own. This poem does a nice job both of demonstrating the potency of poetry, and of bringing things to a fittingly open-ended close. It concludes, "Let's leave this place... But let's come watch tomorrow." We want the students to leave still thinking about what they can do with poetry—and of course we want them to come back to the library.

2. Resource Handout

We will pass out the poetry resource list prepared by the MLS student volunteer, encourage the students to keep writing and to share their work with each other (and with us), and say goodnight.

VIII. Bibliography

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Appendix: Texts

My Heart Is In My Throat

Excuse me while I clear my throat—
I might pause with uncertainty
and turn a little red,
but please remain seated,
 I'll be with you soon.

Excuse me while I clear my throat—
you may hear a few squeaks and cracks,
and see me shake uncontrollably,
but please remain seated,
 I'll be with you soon.

Excuse me while I clear my throat—
I may close my eyes and look
Invisible, but I am still here with you.
I have never done this before,
I have never sung a song
my song
of inner hopes and fears.
They may seem silly, childish, inscrutable,
and may take me a minute, year
but please remain seated,
 I'll be with you soon.

*--Erin B. Henry (age 17)
from Things I Have to Tell You*

I Wrote a Good Omelet

I wrote a good omelet...and ate a hot poem...
after loving you
Buttoned my car...and drove my coat home... in the rain...
after loving you
I goed on red...and stopped on green...floating somewhere in between...
being here and being there...
after loving you
I rolled my bed...turned down my hair...
slightly confused but...I don't care...
Laid out my teeth...and gargled my gown...then I stood
...and laid me down...
to sleep...
after loving you

--Nikki Giovanni. Reprinted in Jago, "I Ate a Poem"

See photocopies for Paul Fleischman's "Honeybees" (from *Joyful Noise*)
and "Ghosts' Grace" (from *Big Talk*).

For the workshop, "Ghosts' Grace" will be typed up in four versions, one
for each reader, with each "role" bolded for easier reading (rather than
sharing between four people reading from the sometimes unclear picture
book).