

Vivian Johnson’s Lesson on Line Breaks

For Vivian Johnson, poetry is not a stand-alone unit. Instead, it’s a yearlong effort to “marinate” her students in the beauty and power of poetic writing. At the beginning of the school year, the first thing her eighth graders hear her say is a poem. It’s also the final thing they hear when school ends.

About midway through the year, after the students have read a great deal of poetry and developed opinions about poems that resonate with them, Vivian spends five weeks formally teaching the writing of poetry. To make the process less threatening, the students begin by writing poetry that anyone can do immediately and feel successful—found poetry, acrostics, list poems. From there, they progress to more challenging poetic styles.

Throughout the five-week period, Vivian engages her students in a rich mixture of mini-lessons, reading, discussion, writing, and responding. By the end of the unit, every student has assembled an anthology of his or her favorite poems—a minimum of 40 poems written by others and at least ten original pieces.

Vivian’s poetry unit includes a variety of lessons on figurative language and poetic devices, including this two- to three-day lesson on line breaks captured in *Write in the Middle*. Although the content of the lesson is quite specific, the techniques and strategies Vivian uses apply equally well to other writing genres.

Instructional Goals

Vivian’s lesson on line breaks helps students to:

- Become aware of their power as poets
- Observe and analyze how a sampling of professional poets use line breaks
- Write with an awareness of how line breaks affect the meaning and impact of their poetry

Materials

The main handout Vivian uses for her lesson on line breaks is a packet of illustrative poems interspersed with quotations about the use of line breaks in poetry. Listed below are her sources for the quotations plus the titles of the poems she includes.

Sources for Quotations in the Student Packet

- Atwell, Nancie. *Lessons That Change Writers*. Portsmouth, RI: Heinemann, 2002. ISBN: 0867095067
- Heard, Georgia. *For the Good of the Earth and Sun: Teaching Poetry*. Portsmouth, RI: Heinemann, 1989. ISBN: 043508495X
- Hewitt, Geof. *Today You Are My Favorite Poet: Writing Poems with Teenagers*. Portsmouth, RI: Boynton/Cook, 1998. ISBN: 0867094524
- Janeczko, Paul. *Favorite Poetry Lessons*. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1999. ISBN: 0590006185
- Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Books, 1995. ISBN: 0156724006

Poems Included in the Student Packet

- “Foul Shot” by Edwin A. Hoey (from Jerry George, Don Stone, and Faye Ward, *On Common Ground*, Book 3, Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press/Canada, 1994, ISBN: 0-19-541020-3)
- “Dreams” by Langston Hughes (from *The Dream Keeper*, New York: Knopf, 1996, ISBN: 0679883479)
- “Owl Pellets” by Ralph Fletcher (from *I Am Wings: Poems About Love*, New York: Atheneum, 1994, ASIN: 0027353958)
- “postcard from cape cod” by Linda Pastan (from *Carnival Evening: New and Selected Poems 1968-1998*, New York: Norton, W.W. and Company, Inc., 1999, ISBN: 039331927X)
- “Sam, the Shoe Shop Man” by Cynthia Rylant (from *Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984. ISBN: 0027780007)
- “The Tree” by Molly Jordan (reprinted in Nancie Atwell’s *Lessons That Change Writers*)
- “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks (from *Selected Poems*, New York: Perennial, 1999, ISBN: 0060931744)

Featured Quotation

- Mary Oliver (from *A Poetry Handbook*, Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Books, 1995, ISBN: 0156724006)

Conference Sheets

Vivian also uses peer-conference sheets in her poetry lessons. Examples include:

- Preparation for Poetry Conference (a form the writer completes)
- Conference Sheet (a form with sections for both writer and reviewer)

Additional Classroom Materials

- Sample quotations posted on the walls inside and outside of Vivian’s classroom
- Instructions for poetry reads
- Rubric for poetry anthology
- Reflections on poetry unit
- Rubrics for individual poems
- Scoring guide for published poems

Description of Lesson

Vivian begins her lesson on line breaks with a quotation by poet Mary Oliver and then leads the class in a discussion about the importance of line breaks in poetry, the differences between prose and poetry, and the tools that give the poet power.

Next, four students do an oral presentation of “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks. After hearing the poem read aloud, the class predicts where the lines break in the poem. Then Vivian puts the poem on the overhead projector, and the class discusses how the line breaks informed the reading of the poem and how they shape its meaning and rhythm.

After the discussion, the students take a few moments to look through books of poetry and observe line breaks.

In the next part of the lesson, Vivian hands out a packet of illustrative poems and quotations on line breaks, has students highlight passages that capture their attention, and discusses several poetry models (see the list of poems and books Vivian uses for this packet in “Materials”). The

students follow up by looking for additional examples of effective line breaks in their textbooks or in poetry anthologies and sharing their discoveries with classmates.

After the students have read, discussed, and shared poems that exemplify the use of line breaks, they spend time in writing workshop applying what they have learned to their own writing. The following day, the students use the Conference Sheet to identify their questions about the poems they are working on. Then they read their poems to partners and get input for revision.

The lesson concludes with a whole-class activity in which some students share their pieces and explain how the lesson and conference helped them revise. This sharing also gives students an opportunity for more feedback from the class and from Vivian. As the students read their poems aloud, each classmate records his or her response on a post-it note, and then the post-its are attached to a single sheet of paper and given to the writer.

After the lesson on line breaks ends, the class moves on to a related topic—the use of white space—and a new cycle of instruction, discussion, modeling, reading, writing, conferring, revising, and sharing begins.