

Template for the Interpretation of Poems Utilizing Close Reading

(adapted from the lesson “Practical Criticism” posted on http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=320)

Estimated Time: 100 minutes total, broken into two 50-minute sessions.

[I.A. Richards](#) developed a method for “close reading” or contextualism that provides for an accessible means for interpreting literature, especially poetry. His method is used here to guide students in their interpretation of poetry while at the same times encouraging them to become more aware of their aesthetic reactions to certain poems.

This lesson template allows you to use *The Writer’s Almanac* to quickly create an exercise in interpretation. Use the website’s search box and archives to provide your students with a wide range of poems with which they can practice the close reading method for interpreting poems. Students are first introduced to the method as a whole class. After practicing the method in a small group format, students interpret a final student-selected poem on their own.

Materials:

- Computer with Internet connection.
- Print out of teacher-selected poems and 3 copies of the “Poetic Commentary” worksheets for each student.
- Optional: Transparencies of teacher-selected poems (see prep step 1 below) and “Poetic Commentary” worksheet.
- Optional: speakers and [Real Audio Player 8.0](#) or higher installed on classroom computer.
- Optional: Access to word processor for each student.

Objectives for Middle and High School Students:

- Each student will use the close reading method to analyze literary devices and imagery poets use to create meaning.
- Each student will use the close reading method to develop and compare one’s personal interpretation of a poem with those of his or her peers.
- Each student will use the close reading method to develop standards for literary judgment and understand one’s aesthetic reaction to forms of poetry.

Correlations with the [Minnesota Academic Standards](#)

| Grade | Subject | Strand | Sub-Strand | Standard | Benchmark |
|-------|---------------|------------------------|------------|---|--|
| 7 | Language Arts | Reading and Literature | Literature | The student will actively engage in the reading process and read, understand, respond to, analyze, interpret, evaluate and appreciate a wide variety of fiction, poetic and nonfiction texts. | 5. Analyze how figurative language and literary devices contribute to the meaning of a text. 8. Explain how form and stylistic devices convey the meaning of a poem. |
| 8 | Language Arts | Reading and Literature | Literature | The student will actively engage in the reading process and read, understand, respond to, analyze, interpret, evaluate and appreciate a wide variety of fiction, poetic and nonfiction texts. | 4. Analyze and evaluate how figurative language and literary devices contribute to the meaning of a text. 7. Respond to and analyze the effects of sound, form, figurative language and graphics in order to uncover meaning in poetry. |
| 9-12 | Language Arts | Reading and Literature | Literature | The student will actively engage in the reading process and read, understand, respond to, analyze, interpret, evaluate and appreciate a wide variety of fiction, poetic and nonfiction texts. | 4. Evaluate the impact of an author’s decisions regarding word choice, point of view, style and literary elements. 8. Analyze classic and contemporary poems for poetic devices |

PREP: Estimated time: 15 – 30 minutes

- 1) Peruse *The Writer's Almanac* website (<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/>) and select two poems to read and/or play for your class. You might experiment with using the search box to find a favorite poet.
- 2) If you are planning on using an audio clip of a poem, test your speaker set-up to be sure the poem can be heard throughout your classroom.
- 3) Locate black/whiteboard space, transparency paper, etc. for space to write class observations.
- 4) Print off and make enough copies of the poem(s) you've selected as well as two copies of the attached analysis sheet for each student in your class. Consider making transparencies of the poems with which you are modeling the method.
- 5) Practice how to paraphrase one of the poems: express in your own plain prose, what you think the poem means (either to the author or you).
- 6) Walk through steps 4a – 4d below. Be clear about what you intend to present to your students.

INSTRUCTION: Estimated time: 75 – 100 minutes, depending on how long the class continues its discussion.

Session 1:

- 1) Brainstorm with your class what they think a poem is. Why do people write, read, speak and listen to poetry?
- 2) Query the class on the forms of poetry with which they're familiar (free verse, haiku, Shakespearean sonnets, rap, etc.). Ask for examples of each form mentioned and which forms might resonate with your students. Suggest other forms and give examples to round out the list, if needed.
- 3) Read or play the poem(s) you selected. Ask for student responses (if you think they'll be positive).
- 4) Walk your students through the "close reading" method for interpreting a poem:
 - a. Paraphrase one of the poems you've selected. Explain how you think how you've paraphrased the poem captures its meaning.
 - b. Comment on the poem's imagery. What metaphors or literary devices did the poet use to convey meaning and mood? How did the imagery lend "emotional color"? Did the poet consistently use the same imagery throughout the poem?
 - c. Describe the overall mood. What "feeling" does it communicate to the reader or yourself? What impression does the poem leave?
 - d. Finally, invite your students to comment on the poem. Try to elicit an opinion about the poem, challenging them to incorporate points made in the previous steps into their opinion.
- 5) As a class repeat the method with your second poem, filling out the analysis sheet together.
- 6) **BREAK POINT.** This is a good point to divide the lesson into two parts, especially if the conversation has taken longer than you anticipated.

Session 2:

- 7) Assign students to small groups of three each and explain that they are to browse *The Writer's Almanac* to select a poem as a group and a poem to comment on individually.
- 8) Allow time for students to access their computers and fire up their browser. Direct students to enter in the URL for *The Writer's Almanac* (<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/>) either by typing in the URL from their commentary worksheet or clicking on the appropriate link under the "Selected Resources" section of this month's Sound Learning page (<http://www.soundlearning.org/features/2006/04>).
- 9) Have students bookmark their chosen poems. Alternatively, they may want select the text of the poem and paste it into a word processing application (many poems are buried with a week's worth of readings and could be difficult to return to).
- 10) As they browse, prompt students to be aware of what guides their decisions: was it the title, the author's name, the date the poem was written, the poems' length, the form, etc.
- 11) Once each group has chosen four poems, have them divide the poems between the group's members and choose one poem to review as a group.
- 12) Prompt students to review the group poem first, to practice the technique introduced in part 1, following the steps outlined in the commentary sheet.
- 13) Students should then comment on the last poem they've selected, on their own, following the same method.
- 14) After an appropriate amount of time, call the groups back together and, as a class, share the commentary on the groups' favorite poems.
- 15) Ask that students discuss what did they learn from the process. What stage in the process was the most difficult or revealing? How did the exercise make them more self-aware as poetry readers? Would they want to read and maybe write other poems from the same form?
- 16) Query student on whether their views of poetry have changed. Why do people write, read, speak and listen to poetry?
- 17) Collect the commentaries on the individual poems for you to assess.

ALTERNATIVES, EXTENSIONS, and ACCOMDATIONS:

- 1) Limit the poets you want to your students to read by requiring your students to search for certain poets using *The Writer's Almanac* search box.
- 2) Hold a reading of the student's chosen poems over several days, repeating the method for commenting on the poem.
- 3) Once students are able to apply the method, try it with the lyrics of popular but acceptable rap or pop songs and work through the same process. Are the results similar to working with poems?
- 4) For students who are have limited English proficiency, preview a number of shorter poems ahead of time to assign. Identify and review words they might have trouble understanding prior to reading the poems. NOTE: This will add approximately 20 more minutes of preparation and possibly another 50 minutes of instructional time.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Hour: _____

Poetic Commentary: Group or Individual

Go to <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/>

- With your group members, look through *The Writer's Almanac* website and select a poem to work on together and another to work on by yourself.
- Don't see anything you immediately like? Try the search box or browse the archives. There are over 1,300 poems to be found and enjoyed.

Step 1: Paraphrase the poem.

Write a sentence or two that describes the poem, expressing the feeling and images the poem gives you in your own words.

Step 2: Comment on the imagery.

What images or pictures did the poem give you? How did those images add to the poem's emotional quality? Was the poet consistent in using the same images?

Step 3: Comment on the poem's "mood" or feeling with which you left.

Describe what feeling you get from the poem. Are you left feeling happy or uplifted, sad, angry, what? What words did the poet use to invoke that feeling?

Step 4: What's your opinion?

Overall, did you like the poem? Did it "connect" with you somehow? Was this a "good" or "bad" poem? Why?
