

from our hands to yours
Ideas and exercises for writing poetry
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Let's talk about writing poetry together

Here I want to pull together the ideas and exercises which shaped the book *from our hands to yours*. While writing these notes, I am well aware that teachers, and writing tutors, are creative people full of ideas, and all I'm offering is a sample from several years of writing poetry with ESOL students at Mana College in Porirua.

My starting point in writing poetry with ESOL (or any) students is that everyone can write. Some students will have a very good idea of what poetry is (from their own cultural background) while for some the idea of a poem will be new. But they will most likely all have a sense of language, and of the music and rhythm of words. Most have no overlay of what poetry 'should be', and they bring a fresh eye and a fresh use of language, and I see those as huge advantages.

In every class I've had, there has been a range of students from English beginners to quite competent speakers, and I've found that the students use these exercises at their own level.

How we start

I start by introducing some basic ideas about poetry. But not all at once. The pattern of each weekly session is that I introduce a new idea, often with a very small writing exercise (maybe one line) then we look at last week's poem (that I've typed) then we write a new poem. And we eat chocolate. (Typing poems might seem like one job too many, but the poems are short and quick to type, and seeing a poem typed is transforming).

The basic ideas about poetry

1. What is a poem?

It's short, it can create a picture in the head, tell a small story or recall a memory. It doesn't have too many words. It has some music or rhythm to it. We read some poems together to get a feel for what poetry is (they could be poems from this book)

2. Poetry is about finding the best words.

We taste a range of foods – date, chocolate, apple etc – and find words to describe both the taste, and the feeling of it in the mouth.

I take a collection of sound 'instruments' -clackers, shakers, paper crumpling, etc, and we write the best words to describe these sounds. Sometimes the students find words in their first language. We make lists of their words on a white board; this keeps increasing their own vocabulary.

3. Poetry is about using the imagination

I take a collection of little boxes. What might be in each one? We don't know, so we are using our imagination. We write down our ideas, then we listen to all of them. I stress that **all** ideas are good.

4. Poetry is about using details

Details make poems come alive. 'Lunch' doesn't mean much, but 'sandwiches' or 'sticky rice' create pictures. Or better still, cheese sandwiches. These details create a picture in the head, and in the mouth!

Here is an exercise in using details.

Find two details in the classroom that you think no one else will see. Write 3 lines:

In this classroom

there is xxx

and xxx

This exercise, as well as being about close observation and detail, creates a completely different picture of a classroom!

5. Poems can use rhyme, or not

Poems don't have to rhyme. Most poems don't rhyme these days, but some do.

Here's an exercise on using rhyme.

Look at a small poem that rhymes.

In the sun this tree shines green

At night it's black and can't be seen.

Write three lines that all rhyme with one word, eg sea.

Look at a prose sentence:

There's a tree outside my window and it's tall and straight and bends in the wind.

Rearrange the sentence into a poem. (Often in this class we write prose, then rearrange it to find the poem in it). Read it aloud to hear the rhythm in it.

Outside my window

there's a tree

*It's tall and straight
and bends in the wind
like a ship's mast.*

This poem can also introduce the idea of comparison 'Like a ship's mast'. We talk about other things that a tree can be like.

6. Poems can be any length

But setting a certain required length is useful. I often say, write 4 lines, or 2 lines, or 6 lines. It makes the task clear and gives the students something to aim for. This is particularly useful for students finding writing a challenge. If I say, write two lines, or even, write one line, they can always do it. If I just say, write a poem, it's too vague – although as the students become more experienced, I can just say 'write a poem'

7. A poem has a life of its own

Often we start with an exercise, and the poem goes somewhere completely different. This is always exciting – although sometimes I ask them to follow a form or an idea exactly, because there is a challenge and a discipline in that.

8. Poems get better

From the beginning I introduce the idea of editing – that most of the poems we write, we can make stronger, or better.

Every week I type up the students' poems and give them back typed the next week. Then we look at the typed poems, and very quickly the students learn how to edit them. We look for four things.

- a. Are there words you don't need, that you can take out?
- b. Are there repeated words you can take out, or find another word for? (although at some stage we talk about how effective repetition can be, and how to deliberately use it)
- c. Have you said general things when details would be better?
- d. How does the poem sound? Read it aloud. Listen to the rhythm of it. Are the line breaks in the right place?

Exercises

I usually start with straightforward exercises which use a simple idea, and often a pattern. These suit less competent students, and more competent students create their own challenges with the exercises. The best way for students to get their head around writing poems is to read similar poems. There are examples of all these in *from our hands to yours*.

At the end of some of these exercise descriptions, I've said – glibly! – 'write a poem'. I find that by reading poems and setting good clear exercises, students very quickly get the idea of just going for it and writing a poem.

1. Sounds. p25

We listen to a range of sounds and find words for them. (I might introduce the word *onomatopoeia*. I avoid using literary terms, but sometimes I introduce one, and this word is so weird, and so easy to understand that it's fun.) Then we think of one place and list the sounds we could hear in that place. This might be a memory from the past, or a place they know at present. Write the list as a poem.

A variation of this exercise is to listen to a piece of music and write down what the music reminds us of.

2. I wish, p33

Write a poem where every line starts with 'I wish'. Wishes can be real or crazy. It might be a two-line pattern:

I wish....

so that I can

I encourage every student to write at least 4 lines. Of course they might write much more than that.

A variation on this exercise is for each student to write one or two lines, then combine the lines into a group poem.

3. Colours, p39

Choose one colour. List everything of that colour that you can think of. The colour might also make you think of sounds or feelings. Write them down too. Then choose the lines you like best from that list. (This introduces the idea that we select the best – we don't use everything.) Then write a poem from that list, starting every line with that colour. Read it aloud. Edit it.

Or every line might start with a different colour.

4. Grandparents, p49

I've used this as an exercise in detail.

Choose a grandparent (or it could be a different relative).

What do they look like? List three details

What do they like to do? List two things. Be specific

Think of a particular memory of them.

Write the poem.

5. I seem to be ... but really I am, p65

This exercise is about the difference between the way we may appear to other people, and who we really are inside. It's a powerful exercise.

It uses a simple pattern of two lines.

I seem to be

But really I am

6. What other people think, p59

Like 'I seem to be', this exercise looks at differences between outside and inside – what other people might think I am doing or thinking etc, and what is really happening. It's a poem in two parts,

What other people think.....

But I.....

7. Writing to a person in another country, p79

Think of a specific person. Think of at least four things you want to tell them about New Zealand. If it's easiest, write it as a letter. Then break it into lines and make it a poem.

8. The wind, p89

I'm a big fan of writing in different locations. It keeps our heads fresh. It's not always easy in a school, but writing outside is generally an option (depending on the weather, although writing outside in wind or rain can be very creative). Go outside and write down what you observe. Use all the senses – hearing, sight, sound, feeling. List at least six details.

Then write them into a poem.

9. Random crazy (nouns and adjectives), p97

I don't use many grammatical terms, but for this exercise I use 'noun' and 'adjective' and explain the terms first, if necessary.

Take a blank piece of paper, fold it vertically down the centre. On the right side of the fold, write a vertical list of nouns. Draw a line across the fold underneath each word.

Change papers. Keep the paper folded so the next student can't see the list of nouns. They write an adjective beside each line.

This creates a crazy random list of paired nouns and adjectives.

Then write a poem using as many of these pairs as you can.

10. The house I grew up in, p109

Imagine yourself walking up to the door. What do you see? List two details.

Then list three things inside the house. A person is doing something. There is a particular smell or a sound. Go into your old room. What do you see/remember?

You might include several words in your first language.

At some point we talk about whether these words need a translation or whether the meaning is clear from the poem. And if the words do need a translation, how we can include it (a note at the end of the poem?)

11. Some people know, p117

This is a wonderful exercise for students who may feel that what they know or have experienced isn't recognised or valued here.

The first line of the poem is:

Some people know.....

Then make a list of specific things that you know (particularly that people here may not know)

Then the last line is:

And some people don't.

12. A person came into a house, p125

Start with a person coming into a house. Could be you, could be someone else.

Imagine a place they can put things – a table, a bed, the floor

They begin to put down things – actual objects.

Then they put down things they have done/heard/seen during the day

Then they put down memories, wishes, fears,

Then one last thing - how does the person feel?

13. Pantoum, p149, and haiku

A pantoum is a poem with 4-line stanzas and pattern of repeated lines.

Stanza 1: 1,2,3,4

Stanza 2: 2,5,4,6

Stanza 3: 5,7,6,8

Stanza 4: 7,3,8,1

It looks difficult, but isn't hard to write, particularly when the students have a clear simple example to follow – although I did do this when we had been writing together all year. I was amazed at how well the students could use this form.

There are no haiku in this collection, because I discovered after we had compiled the book that writing haiku was a great exercise. Although the haiku form can be flexible, we kept rigidly to the form of 3 lines with the pattern of 5/7/5 syllables and the students really liked the challenge of fitting lines into that pattern.

14. I come from, p159

This is also a poem that uses a pattern; every line starts with

'I come from '

Think of a place you come from, or that you call home.

Think of three tastes; three smells; three sounds; three objects; three feelings (good and bad); three people; three most important things in your life; three dreams.

Write a list. Then select from the list and order it.

15. Concrete poems, p171

Students simply need to be shown examples of concrete poems to understand the idea. If it's a poem about a fish, the poem is written in the shape of a fish. This is an excellent exercise for some students who feel less able to write a conventional poem.

16. Write a poem in your first language

This was one of the most successful exercises I used, which is not surprising. I suggested choosing a subject related to home, family, or a big event. (I always try to suggest a starting point, because it's much harder writing a poem from nothing). The students wrote in their first language but also wrote an English version. They sometimes found writing an English version hard. We talked about how the English poem is a version, not a translation, because it's hard to translate poetry. These poems are not included in *from our hands to yours*, because of publishing constraints.

17. Group poems, pp103, 143.

We have written several group poems, where we take a theme and each student writes one or two lines, then we combine them all into a long poem. It's been an excellent way of including all the students, regardless of their ability.

18. Other ideas

At the start of each year I ask the students what they'd like to write about. Their ideas range from their home countries to new computer games. We also do things just for fun, like writing a group story – each person adds a sentence without seeing previous sentences.

Resources

I constantly learn and borrow and steal from other people. Two books I find invaluable are *How to Grow Your Own Poem*, by Kate Clanchy, and *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* by Kenneth Koch (its subtitle is 'Teaching children to write poetry', but its range is much wider than that).

Finally

Each year we've made a booklet of all the students' poems. It's not difficult to do, because I already have all the poems typed. One student designs a cover. I use Bookfold to create the booklet (Bookfold is an option in Word, under Print/Set up/Pages/Multiple pages/Bookfold). It creates an A5 booklet with the pages in the correct printing order. I include all the poems from all the students. Then we have a book launch, and some readings!