



Thinking creatively: how to write... a poem

Overview: In our last exercise, we looked at solving problems when writing a film script. This month's creative thinking activities are about 'thinking outside the box' when writing poetry: innovation and exploration.

Time: 30-60 minutes per activity

Teachers: We suggest you use these ideas in class and then display or make a simple book from the poems. It can help if you do some research and find more examples of the kinds of poems mentioned in this worksheet so that you can show some examples to your students.

Students: Each of these activities will help you practise not only your writing skills and use of vocabulary, but also help you with the valuable life skills of innovation and exploration. Don't be afraid to experiment!

Level: Intermediate

Introduction: Poetry, innovation and exploration

When you write a poem you create something new: a new way of looking at or thinking about the world - this is innovation. When you write a poem you are always thinking about language, not only the meaning of the words, but also how they sound and how they look on a page – this is exploration.

A poem *can* tell a story, but it's not necessary. A poem *can* have characters, but they're not necessary. A poem *can* rhyme (use words which have the same sound), but it doesn't have to.

When you write a poem, you can write anything.

This worksheet will help you to innovate and explore through the process of writing a poem.

Activity 1: Acrostic

A poem where the first letter of each line makes a word is
 Called an 'acrostic'. It's not
 Really hard to write
 One.
 Stick to the rules, but
 Try to explore,
 Innovate and...
 Create!

An acrostic is one of the simplest types of poems to write. There is a rule – the first letters of each line must make a word, but other than that, you can write anything you want.

- In this exercise, use your own name – for each letter think of an adjective or short phrase that describes yourself. For example:

Curious, usually
 Happy,
 Ready to try anything new,
 Interested in lots of things, and sometimes a bit
 Silly.

- Now think of one of your favourite words in English (a word you like because it makes you think of something good – 'happy', 'friends' or 'smile' – or just because you like the way it sounds – 'banana' or 'wobble') and use that to make your acrostic.

Lighting up every moment, the whole world
 Over,
 Vanishing only when everything
 Ends.

THINKING CREATIVELY



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Activity 2: A few of my favourite things

There is a song from the musical *The Sound of Music* called 'My Favourite Things'. The words to the song are nothing but a list of some things that the singer likes.

This is a great way to write a poem.

Very simply, think of some of your favourite things, and write them down.

Some hints with this activity:

- ▶ Think beyond the obvious – what things, perhaps, do you like that no one else likes?
- ▶ Remember to use all your senses – include sights, sounds, smells and tastes you like.
- ▶ When you have written your list, try moving the words around – think of the rhythm of the words. Try reading it aloud, and see how it sounds!

Activity 3: Calligrams

A calligram is a poem that describes a thing, and is written in the shape of the thing which it describes.

The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire wrote a lot of calligrams, you can see some of his, and some others [here](#).

Even if you are not good at drawing, you can still write a good calligram.

- ▶ Think of an image (don't make it too complicated), and do a simple drawing (in pencil) of the image. Then write words that describe it inside the lines of the drawing. After that, you can rub out the pencil lines.

Activity 4: Haiku

A haiku is a traditional Japanese form of poetry. A haiku does not rhyme, but it does have a special structure. An English haiku always has only three short lines – the first line has five syllables, the second line seven syllables, and the third line also has five syllables. Usually, a haiku is a description of the natural world.

Recently, a newspaper in New York held a competition for people to write haiku about that city. [Here are some of the entries](#).

- ▶ Think about your natural surroundings and where you live. Do you live in a city or in the countryside? Are there many green spaces? Are there animals? What do you like most about your environment? Try to describe your favourite thing about where you live in a few lines and make a haiku.

Activity 5: The Explorer's Notebook

It's time to get your notebooks out again! Remember that as a writer, you are an explorer of the everyday world, and as someone who is writing a poem, an explorer of language.

There are lots of ways you can use what you have written in your notebook.

1. The French poet Apollinaire (we looked at some of his work in the 'Calligrams' section) wrote a poem called '*Lundi, Rue Christine*' ('Monday in the rue Christine' in the English translation). This poem is simply a list of things the poet overheard people saying one Monday morning on a street near his home. You can do this too: look at some of the conversations you have written in your notebook or go out and carefully listen for some more! It doesn't have to be an entire conversation, a few overheard lines will do. Then – as in the 'Favourite Things' exercise – put the lines in order and feel free to change them a bit to make them sound better.
2. Capturing the moment. In some ways, a poem is like a photograph; it is a simple description of a moment or place. Many great poems mix a description of the natural world (either the countryside or the city) with a description of the writer's feelings at that moment (look at the English poet William Wordsworth's famous poem 'Daffodils,' for example). Look in your notebook and find a description you have written of a time or place. Does it include your feelings? Can you remember how you felt when you were in that place? Write these things down, as simply as you can, and then you will have a poem.



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Activity 6: 'Tell it slant'

The American poet Emily Dickinson once said 'Tell the truth – but tell it slant'. By this, she meant describe something real, but describe it in an unusual way.

Poetry often uses metaphor – describing something as if it were something else.

For example, there is a willow tree outside my window, and some birds are flying around it.

What does the tree look like? To me, it looks like a fountain of leaves.

What do the birds look like? To me, they look like tiny children's kites.

I could write, 'There is a tree that looks like a fountain of leaves and some birds that look like tiny kites', but if I want to 'tell it slant' I simply write:

A fountain of leaves, circled by tiny kites

This could be the first line of my poem.

- ▶ Look around you and identify objects and/or events you see and write them down. Then 'tell it slant'.

Remember

- ▶ **Rhyme:** As we said before, poems don't have to rhyme, but playing with rhyme can make your poem funnier, or easier to remember. Use a rhyming dictionary if you have one, or find one online.
- ▶ **Presentation:** How a poem looks on the page, or how it sounds can be as important as what it says. When you have written a poem you are happy with, write or type it on a piece of A4 paper and see how it looks. Read your poem aloud (even if no one else is listening!) to see how it sounds.
- ▶ **Mix it up:** Mix up some of the ideas above – write a calligram haiku, for example, or a favourite things acrostic.

Follow up

- ▶ **Read around:** If you are working in a class or group, read each other's poems and tell the writer something you like about the poem, and something that they could improve on.
- ▶ **Poetry Slam:** If you are working in a class or group, have a poetry slam! This is when poets get together, and all read out their work to each other. The audience then votes to see which poem they like best!
- ▶ **Word gallery:** Put your poems on the wall of your classroom, if you can (or even on the walls of your bedroom!). Poetry can look good too – this works especially well if you have done calligrams.
- ▶ **Make a collection:** Type up your poems or (if they are calligrams, for example) take a picture of them and store them as a visual file. Then print and bind the pages to make a simple book.
- ▶ Writing poetry helps you find ways to express things through analogy and gives you stronger skills in thinking about diversity. Thinking outside the box is not only important when writing poetry. As a follow-up activity, think about a situation in your life where you had to be innovative and think outside the box.

