

Writing from Images

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Grade level: Elementary and Middle School

Time frame: 45 min – 1 hour

Learning objectives:

- Write individual ekphrastic poems from magazine clippings, parts of pictures, and abstractions of images.
- Practice using creative writing as a medium for description and observation via magazine images.
- Inspire curiosity by exploring multiple outcomes of an image. This activity works great with elementary school, and is also useful for middle school when writing creatively starts to become more challenging.
- Practice editing, collaboration and combining poems in small groups.

Activity Prep: Go through magazines ahead of time and cut out images that are interesting to look at, or parts of images. This is especially successful with parts of images that are textured, or up close and hard to decipher. Find combinations of abstract images and recognizable images for different learners. Make sample poems with some of the images to read aloud to the class when setting up the introduction.

Introduction: Have the class sit in a circle and place the images in the middle. Hold up the pieces you wrote sample poems about, and show everyone the image while reading your poem. Explain how you got where you did from that image and try to demystify the complex reputation of poems: all you did was describe the picture and start to get curious! Encourage everyone to give it a try and have fun with it. (Give the class several examples.)

Examples:

Dark side of a mountain
With the bright blue sky
Has the sun just set?

This is exciting! All that pink fluff!
Fingery feathers, bubblegum pink.
Can I jump inside?

Baby elephant carrying plants
You look as shy as me on my first day of school
Are you on your way home?



Activity Part One (20-25 minutes):

Have the class come up and ask each student to choose an image that interests them. Then start simple: have the students write just three lines to begin with. Lines one and two are only describing what they see (ie. “Dark side of a mountain / With the bright blue sky”). Emphasize that there are no tricks to this, just two lines talking about what can be observed about the image. Line three is a question, and it can be anything you would like to ask the image or that you wonder about the image (ie. “Why are there bubbles?” or “Has the sun just set?”).

Give the students time to come up with three-line poems, then ask them to switch images with the classmate next to them and try a new image. Then switch again! Encourage goofy, strange and wild thoughts; facilitate a space where poetry is playful and there are no wrong answers. Encourage bilingual poems, sounds and onomatopoeia.

Activity Part Two (5 minutes):

Have the students read what they wrote to the classmates they switched images with. Ask, “What does everyone have to say about the images? Did someone notice something you didn’t?”

Activity Part Three, Group Collaboration (15-20 minutes):

Ask small groups (two or three students) to start a new piece of paper that combines all the lines about one of the images. Encourage editing practices by keeping some of the lines, or combining some of the lines together.

***Other Options:** Depending on the age of the students and their previous knowledge of poetry, I also like to ask the students to include one metaphor, one simile, or a type of personification. This activity can lend itself well to incorporate other literary devices you have already discussed.*

Closing (5-8 min):

Save room at the end for sharing! Write new ones yourself and share those too. Collaborate with the class and give encouraging praise for all shared ideas.