

Write Ideas

Teacher's Guide

Notes on Teaching Children to Write Poetry
By Aleda Shirley



Introduction

Write Ideas is a series of 10 short video exercises designed to spark the imagination of children, to help them find clever, wacky, enticing ideas to write about. These exercises are based on my experience of five years as a poet-in-residence in the Jefferson County Schools in Louisville, Kentucky. During that period, I worked with more than 3,000 students and more than 100 teachers. I have also led several workshops for teachers—workshops whose purpose was to help teachers better use creative writing techniques in the classroom.

Write Ideas is a compact, video version of the techniques I used with students of all ages; this booklet attempts to codify the techniques that spawned thousands of vibrant poems about vibrant human experiences; I hope they will do the same for you.

There are two indispensable books a teacher interested in teaching creative writing should look over. Written by a New York poet named Kenneth Koch, they are *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* (You also may find his other books, *I Never Told Anybody* and *Sleeping on the Wing*, helpful.) Koch's books—his revolutionary ideas about the teaching of poetry to young people—have been invaluable to me. He gave me confi-

dence when I was inexperienced, ideas when I was blank, encouragement when I needed it. Since my first classes, I have developed many of my own ideas and modified those of his that I still use. You can do the same.

What follows is a description of a typical poetry lesson. This is both a picture of what worked for me and an exploration of how you can incorporate the *Write Ideas* exercises into lessons of your own.

Introducing Poetry to Young People

Before I begin working with any group of students, I ask them to forget everything anyone else has ever told them about poetry, to imagine their minds are a chalkboard and they're erasing everything on it about poetry. I explain how we're going to talk a little while each day about something and then I'm going to ask them to write some sentences about what we've discussed. After they've written their papers, I explain how I will collect them (I intentionally refer to them as "papers," not poems) and read them all aloud.

This may seem a strange way to begin a poetry unit, but I have found it effective. Students share with our culture in general a distrust—and often an aversion—to poetry, and I think it crucial to let them know, early on, that you are not

expecting them to write the saccharine doggerel so many children's books offer up as poetry.

My poetry lessons generally last about 45 minutes each. Your lessons may vary: If you have a small class (say, fewer than 20 students) or very young students, the session sometimes will take 10 minutes or less. If you quickly introduce the *Write Ideas* video, show the spot (which takes about three minutes), discuss the poetry idea for about 10 to 15 minutes, have the students write for another 15, and conclude with reading each paper aloud, your lesson will run about 45 minutes as well.

Following Up on the "Write Idea"

In the video, I explain the "write idea" ("Colors" or "The Third Eye"), offer examples, and tell the students to write several long and detailed sentences that occur to them as a result of thinking about and playing with the idea. Following the video, you can solicit examples from your students. Many teachers have expressed their fear that they won't be able to think of examples. For this there is an easy solution: Simply read to the class children's poems from Koch's books or from other anthologies of student work (often available from your state's arts council). Explain how these poems were written on the same subject by kids their own age.



Next, ask your students to write down their own ideas on the topic. Tell them not to worry about neatness or spelling. Students, especially younger ones, will spend all their time fretting about how to spell a word (and will drive you crazy asking) if you don't insist from the beginning that they sound out words as best they can. (If you want to have them copy and correct their papers—and thus hone their editing skills—you can have them do this at a later time.) It's important that they feel maximum freedom and minimum pressure while composing. Other cultural pressures are already inhibiting them enough; you don't want to add another one.

As your students write, walk around the room, praising and encouraging their efforts, helping those students who are stuck, urging those who write quickly to add another sentence or two. When a student is stuck, I usually ask specific questions about the poetry idea (e.g., What is your favorite color? What is something which is that color? Where and when did you see it?). The answers to these questions can become sentences for the student to write down.

Generally I have my students write for about 15 minutes, but you will want to judge for yourself. You'll be able to tell when most of your students are finishing up. Collect the papers and read each one out loud. Give your students the option of having their names read aloud. This option is very important: Many children can write freely only when their anonymity is assured. Praise all the papers extravagantly.

Praise

I cannot stress enough the importance of praising the students' efforts. I try to compliment each child in an intense, specific way at least once during a week of writing lessons. I praise the class collectively each day. The only time I criticize any child is when it's clear that child is not trying at all (for instance, a child who refuses to write), when a paper is unkind to another student, or when a paper concerns something I feel is inappropriate.

Definitions of what is inappropriate will differ from person to person; I myself refuse to read extremely gory papers, papers that deal with the more private

of bathroom activities, sexual descriptions that merit more than a G rating, and political solutions that include violence to public figures. When I encounter this kind of paper—and I do, though not usually more than one or two a class—I calmly explain to the class that I am not interested in these things, that the world is full of other, exciting things to write about. If a child refuses to write, I offer the option of copying pages out of the dictionary. Thus far, out of more than 3,000 students, none has opted for the transcription of Webster's.

Students need to understand that their poems will not be graded. Tell them they will do fine as long as they try. If you must grade them, make it an A or F situation (i.e., any student who tries receives a good mark).

Rhyme

Many teachers ask me whether students should be encouraged to rhyme their poems or be taught poetic forms such as the haiku and limerick. At the risk of sounding dogmatic, I give you my answer: No. Instructors of the visual arts do not begin instruction by demanding draftsmanlike skills of perspective and shadow; similarly, we should not ask students with little exposure to poetry to begin with difficult poetic forms. Think about it: If someone asked you to write a poem and insisted that it rhyme, you would most likely worry more about coming up with words that rhymed than about saying something truly important to you.

The "Un-poetic"

You will no doubt receive, at least in the beginning, some papers that strike you as decidedly un-poetic. Like it or not, our children live in a world of fast food restaurants and basketball, video games and situation comedies, sports cars and name-brand shirts. They will write about these things because these things are important to them. And, though sometimes I'm convinced that I will go stark raving mad if I read one more

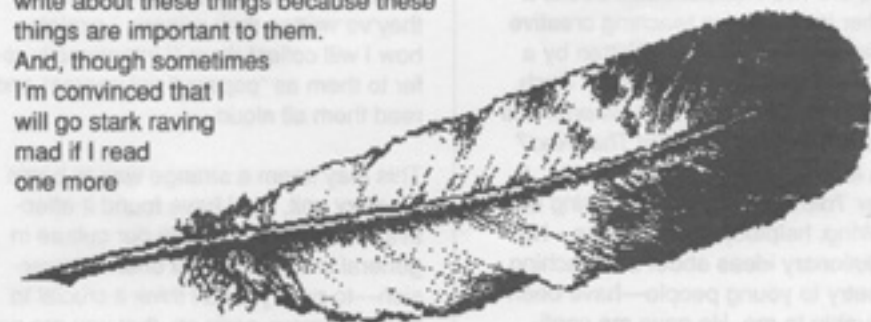
word about a nearby amusement park, I'm also convinced it is important I accept what the students write. If a child can begin to notice the glint of sunlight off the hood of a Corvette, perhaps he or she will notice the yellow leaves of a tulip poplar and the bright forsythia along backyard fences. When I tell them the yellowest yellow I've ever seen is the mustard on a quarter-pound hamburger, the purplest purple a bruise I got in a skating mishap, I see palpable relief pass across my students' faces. Their expression says, "Well, maybe this won't be so dumb after all."

Surprises

Be prepared for surprises. The most gratifying thing about teaching children about poetry has been seeing the children it touched—against all odds. I have seen children who were barely able to write catch fire from poetry and create beautiful images. I have seen mathematically or scientifically inclined children reveal a dreamy, tender sensibility that surprised their teachers and their parents. I have seen what we would have called in another era "juvenile delinquents" turn around and begin attacking other subjects with the same enthusiasm they feel for poetry. These sorts of miracles do not happen everyday, mind you; for most children it is a worthwhile, fun experience that, more often than not, improves their writing and their attitudes toward literature.

The Programs

What follows is a description of each of the 10 programs, or "write ideas." They derive not only from Kenneth Koch's theories and my ideas, but also from my experiences with students, the poems and other pieces they wrote, and what I learned from—and my friendships with—the teachers I worked with.



1: Colors

Aleda asks your students to think of different colors they have seen. Which of those seemed the most vibrant? What is the reddest red, the greenest green thing they have ever encountered?

These questions make for a good first-day writing assignment. As your students write, encourage them to be detailed, to tell you where they were when they encountered the greenest green, how they felt, what else was going on, when they saw that blue swimming pool, that red apple, that white ghost.

2: The Third Eye

Aleda tells your students that the third eye is simply an eye that can see things their regular eyes can't see. Their regular eyes may see the chalkboard with work on it; their third eyes can see the past, the future, even things that don't exist. Insist that your students be specific; if their third eyes can see through the wall or can see what they're going to be when they grow up, make them tell you what they see.

3: Wishes

Aleda asks your students to write several long, detailed sentences about their wishes—their unusual, crazy, even weird wishes. This is probably the simplest of the poetry ideas—good for a rainy day or a reward. But even though it's simple, don't let students get by with simply listing all the presents they want.

4: Animals

What does it feel like to be an animal? Aleda lets your students choose any animal they want and imagine what it's like being that animal—and then writing lots of long, detailed sentences about their ideas. What does the animal look like? Where does it live? How does it sound? What makes it happy? What makes it sad?

5: Letter to the Moon

Dear Mr./Ms. Moon ... Aleda tells your

students that they suddenly have the power to talk to the moon. In their letters to the moon, they might tell the moon about things it resembles on Earth, or ask it some questions about how it feels, or perhaps tell it something about themselves.

You might adapt this exercise by allowing students to write a letter to any heavenly body they choose.

6: Seeing Music

Mitch joins Aleda to play some instrumental music for your students. Their job is to write down what they see when they listen to the music or imagine what the music would be if it were not music (i.e., would it be a person? a tree? a different part of the world?).

You can repeat this exercise by bringing in instrumental music. Select a piece that is very different from what they've heard on *Write Ideas* and that is not something they are familiar with. Classical music or jazz works well.

7: Simultaneous Events

With this "write idea," Aleda wants your students to imagine things that might be going on at this very minute, while they are watching the show and writing their sentences, in other places. They are free to imagine what is happening at their house or at the shopping mall, or they can range farther afield and imagine what's happening on the South Pole or in Venice, Italy. As you encourage them with their writings, ask them to be specific in their imaginings, to describe what sights there are to see, what sounds to hear, how people are feeling, what clothes they are wearing.

8: Quiet Times

In this quiet exercise, Aleda tells your students to think about the times in their lives or the times they can imagine that seem most quiet to them. Aleda stresses that these times only have to seem quiet to them. She also stresses that the students explain to you, in their sentences, why it seemed so quiet.

9: Being Things

Aleda pretends she no longer wants to be a person, that she would rather be an inanimate object. She chooses to be a clock. She describes herself and how she feels, using lots of details and comparing herself to a wide variety of timepieces. Students are asked to choose an object they'd like to be and then to be it.

10: Negative Imagery

Aleda's "write idea" this time sounds complicated, but it isn't—it's easy and fun. She simply asks your students to select any object and describe what it *isn't*, rather than what it is; to tell what it *can't* do, rather than what it can do. The classroom, for example, is a room with four walls, a door, and a pencil sharpener. It isn't a command post for a spaceship going to Mars, an aquarium with sharks swimming in it; it can't scream "Shut up!" when the class gets too noisy or wear make-up on its brick walls.

About the Writer

Aleda Shirley is a poet who spent more than five years teaching creative writing to young people in the Jefferson County Public School System, Louisville, Kentucky. She has conducted many teacher workshops, not only through her residency with the Jefferson County Schools but also as a faculty member of the Arts and Education Summer Institute sponsored by the Kentucky Center for the Arts. Her first book of poetry, *Chinese Architecture*, was published by the University of Georgia Press. She also has published a chapbook and has been published in numerous national publications, including *American Poetry Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Shenandoah*. She has received writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kentucky Arts Council.

About the Guide

Much of the material in this guide was first published in *If the Moon Has Ears To Hear Me* published by the Office of Cultural Resources, Jefferson County Schools, Louisville, KY.

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