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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Text Structures from Poetry, Grades 4-12*, by Gretchen Bernabei and Laura Van Prooyen. In this introduction from the book, Gretchen Bernabei explores her own past difficulties with teaching poetry, her insights from working with Laura Van Prooyen, and how to use this book to rethink and transform how you teach poetry to your students.

LEARN MORE about this title, including Features, Table of Contents, and Reviews.

Introduction

I'll admit it. I (Gretchen) have never done a good job teaching poetry. I've read some poems I loved and let students write poetry (that I occasionally loved), but I've never been confident about showing them how to deeply analyze a poem or how to write a poem to be proud of.

Apparently, I haven't been alone. If you're a parent, what poems have your children brought home from school? Year after year, you might see a haiku, a cinquain, a diamante, an acrostic poem, maybe a "where I'm from" poem, and then we're out of time—oh well, we've covered poetry.

Lately, I've been thinking about my poetry insecurity, touching my finger onto the sore spot and pushing, and ruminating on several points. *Maybe I've avoided teaching poetry because it's so broad, and my expertise with it is so spotty. Maybe I don't like to parade my insecurities before students, so I spend more class time minutes teaching them how to do things I really do well, and poetry gets short shrift.*

And then the arguments (with myself) begin in earnest.

Truthfully, I do love some poems. In fact, my own personal relationships with poems have been individual and intense. I embraced "My Last Duchess" the moment that my sister Sue whirled around in the front seat of the car in the Kubasaki High School parking lot and soothed my broken teenage heart by reading it to me, showing me how cruel the world can be to gentle people. And I've continued to see the powers of a well-placed poem when my own words aren't powerful enough for a situation. For instance, when another teacher is weary from the daily slings and arrows, there's no talisman like Naomi Nye's "Kindness." Poetry can serve so many purposes: it can incite us to action; poetry can heal.

But these personal experiences with the health benefits of poetry have not translated into competence in teaching the world of poetry to students. Looking around to see how others teach poetry, I've seen some dismal sights: worksheets, dissections, groan-filled packets of figurative language overkill. I've watched eye-rolling adolescents holding their breath as enraptured adults perform some verse or other, unaware that their invitation to the pleasure will never convince any but the two front-row teacher pleasers, about whom later the teachers will purr, " ... and they loved it." These approaches have made me recoil from poetry. Billy Collins clarified it for me in his poem "Introduction to Poetry," describing what happens to poems at the hands of teachers: we tie them to chairs and torture them until they're dead.

I don't want to damage poems or children; I want to *first do no harm*. And so my own Hippocratic teaching oath leads me to avoid fake-teaching poetry. I'd rather teach no poetry than do damage.

So that's the conundrum. As a result, I've turned my attention throughout the years to finding more effective ways to light a prose-writing fire in students, a quest that has kept me occupied for more than 30 years.

And then my poetry world shifted on its axis: I crossed paths with the poet Laura Van Prooyen. She had come to my school, thanks to a grant through Gemini Ink, our gem of a local writers' organization, for a six-week series of poetry writing with sixth graders. When she arrived, I gave her a tour and a cup of coffee, and we shared some of our beliefs and processes. Within the hour, she was explaining to me how she likes to have students look at the way a poem is built in order to emulate that structure in their own poetry. I knew then I'd met a kindred teaching spirit; I told her about my similar focus on structures in other genres and how we teach students to use and eventually choose their own structures when writing any discourse.

Laura surprised me. She teaches children and adults, even her MFA poetry graduate students, to, as she says, "pop the hood on a poem and take a look at the engine." *How does it work? How does one part relate to the other parts? What makes this engine run?*

They look at the mechanics, like rhyme scheme and formation, but most of all, they look at the movement of the parts. The *structure* of the text.

That morning, I joined a group of sixth graders and a couple of their parents as Laura had everyone choose a jellybean, and we were off on a poetry adventure as the flavor of the jellybean led us to memories and a new relationship with Joanne Diaz's "My Mother's Tortilla." I heard myself thinking *I can do this* as I wrote my own poem.

And then we created this book together. I learned to use my well-known tools to read and write poetry, and to learn about the magic of poetry from the poems themselves.

Before we get into the lessons, though, I have to tell you one fascinating thing that I learned from Laura: Don't get her started on a poem's "hidden meaning." Okay, too late. Laura wishes she could say the following to every teacher:

Please stop telling students to find the poem's hidden meaning.

Poets don't write to be confusing.

Poets don't write to frustrate someone with a hidden meaning.

Good poems might have multiple meanings, or maybe you get more meaning when you read it more.

Unanswerable questions are not the same as a hidden meaning.

Poets write so that someone else can understand something, in hopes of a human connection.

Most poets strive for clarity of thought, in one way or another.

Just ask a poet about her "hidden meaning," and you may be in for a rant.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Look through the contents and shop for a poem that looks good to you, or browse through the lessons, looking at their structures to help you decide which ones to choose.

The lessons we included show you how to have students read and write a poem. Because we wanted to streamline the lessons for simplicity, we did not go into the lives of the poets, their contributions, or their thoughts about their work. However, in the appendices you will find some fascinating and juicy messages from the contemporary poets in “Meet the Contemporary Authors.”

LESSON SEQUENCE

Every lesson has a page of Teaching Notes that we use to lead students through the following process.

1. **Freewrite about the topic for two or three minutes.** The idea here is nobody starts with a blank page, and this prevents the “I don’t have anything to write about” problem that could come up later. Some teachers have told us that they ask students to share with a partner at this stage; if there’s an odd number of students, the teacher takes a partner and shares too. Then put this freewriting aside. The students won’t be obligated to use this later, but they might. The purpose is to get their synapses firing.

25 **TEACHING NOTES**
for “The Author to Her Book”

1 **WRITE.** Freewrite for 3 minutes (then set aside).
*Nobody starts with a blank page.

2 **READ.** Read the poem. Aloud. Slowly. Read it again, and this time everyone should underline parts they find striking. Discuss the parts they notice. Name the craft. Notice the parts.

3 **GET THE STRUCTURE.** Reveal the chunked poem. (Students copy the chunks.) Re-read the poem, watching the movement of the structure.

4 **WRITE.** Invite students to write a poem.
Right now you have:
• A page of thoughts
• Examples of craft you like
• A text structure
See what you come up with!
Use any of those, change any, and see what you write in the next minutes.

NOTICE:
• apostrophe (direct address)
• rhyming couplets
• iambic pentameter
• personification

WHAT I WOULD SAY TO THE THING I MADE

What you are.	What happened when you saw me.	What I did next.	What you should say away from me.	What to say when people look about your identity.
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2. **Now it’s time to distribute copies of the poem and look at the poem.** Read the title together with the students. Think together about what the title tells you.
3. **Read the poem aloud.** Read it slowly, just to hear what it does, what it says.

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The Author to Her Book
by Anne Bradstreet

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatch'd from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,
Made thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretch'd thy joints to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling then is meet:
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find.
In this array amongst Vulgars mayst thou roam,
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.

Source: Anne Bradstreet, “The Author to Her Book,” *The South Museum*, 1696.

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4. **Re-read the poem aloud again, and this time, ask the students to write on their copies of the poem as you read, highlighting any parts that strike them, or any craft they notice.** After reading, compare notes about what they marked. Tell them names of what they notice where possible. (Our notes are on the Teaching Notes page, with explanations of terms provided in the glossary.)
5. **Now it's time to show them the structure.** On a document camera or projector, show them the poem all chunked up. Ask them to copy the chunking and the text structure onto their copy of the poem.
6. **Re-read the poem one more time.** Ask them to watch the movement of the text structure as you go through the poem.
7. **Give the students about 10 minutes to write their own poem.** They may choose to use **any** parts of their freewriting, or any of this poet's craft, or the text structure. (They may also choose to change any of these.)

While this sequence provides a solid experience weaving writing and reading together, there are plenty of variations that could also prove useful:

For instance, do steps 1, 3, 4, then 2:

- Freewrite
- Look at the text structure
- Create a poem
- Then share the published poem
- Identify some craft and try that same craft on the writing

Or ... use the structure to write some prose, like a letter, an essay, or a speech.

Or ... use the structure to write a response poem.

Or ... read the poem and write a one-sentence summary of each box in the structure, as a way to summarize, or kernelize, the poem.

Or ... have students take an unmarked poem and do all of the chunking to discover the structure on their own.

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TEXT STRUCTURE
 From "The Author to Her Book"

The Author to Her Book
by Anne Bradstreet

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by FORTUNE, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge),
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling text (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light;
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, if th' house I find,
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam:
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.

What I Would Say to the Thing I Made

What you are	What happened when other people saw you	What I did next	What you should stay away from	What to say when people ask you about your family
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STUDENT POEMS
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From "The Author to Her Book"

To GyroBoy

You're a robot, a code-reader, mostly white and silver on wheels of tuble gold, created by Javan and me. We knew what we were doing.

Your gyro-sensor measures your angle when you lean and then combats the lean.

Gabriel said "Wow" at your self-balances. Aidan piped in surprise.

Our team will work out your kinks. Next we will do battle.

Don't go near the edge of the table. If you do, turn in a 45° angle and move away from the edge. Keep your balance, and try to outlast the enemy.

Your parents are a program and batteries. Your brothers are your gears and axles. Your sisters are your supports, Lego beams. It's a strong family.

Henry L. Schell
Grade 6

A Letter to Robo-Ball

Robo ball, that's your name, my basketball robot game. Students launch your catapult arm so that they can win the candy you throw.

You were supposed to bring surprise and delight and you did. They thought of you as a birthday present that they can play with.

So I let them play, but don't worry I have more Starbursts so you don't get sad when you give them away.

Stay away from toddlers who might break you into pieces or babies who just want to toast your candy heart.

If people ask, tell them your creator had a tough time building you out of a vending machine and a ping pong game. Tell them your creator used his knowledge. He knew what he was doing, and you can be proud.

Ricardo Ramos
Grade 6

Lesson 25 105

TIMING THE LESSON

With students (Grades 4–12) we've worked with, the whole lesson takes 40–55 minutes.

Revisions can take one or more sessions or can go on indefinitely.

We like to have student draft lots of poems and polish up their choices for publication in any number of ways (on the wall, in student anthologies, online).

What do you do with student poetry after it's written?

Students should have plenty of opportunity to play with what they've written, and we've shared some of our favorite ideas in the appendices.

How did we pick THESE poems?

For the contemporary section, we wanted to include a wide representation of a broad range of voices who are keen observers of the world. And we think they emulate the qualities of great poetry, qualities that we think would be great models for young writers.

For the poems from earlier times, we asked some of our favorite English teachers to tell us which poems they think every student should read. We really liked their recommendations.

After you've used these lessons, you'll discover you don't need the book any more. You can use the same (or your own personalized) process to teach any poem you love.

How do we know our text structures are what the poets were thinking?

We don't. The poem chunks seemed clear to us, but these are arbitrary divisions. You might kernelize the poem differently. On a different day, so might we. But our aim is to provide students with a workable, manageable structure that we see clearly in the poems, in hopes that they will not only find these structures useful for writing but also to help train their eyes to spot structures as they read on their own, to become natural chunkers. To reduce their fear of the word "analysis" by learning how to do it first. To teach them to pop the hood on the poem to see how it works, and to trust their eyes when they look under that hood.

We don't want to tie up a poem onto a chair; we'd rather teach children to look at a poem and read it with a light touch. If we feel confident teaching children to read and write poems like that, then we may not avoid teaching poetry. As a result, our students will read and produce poetry that they can be proud of. I wish I'd had this book years ago, and we hope you enjoy using it now.