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The

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English Teacher's

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Companion

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A Complete Guide to Classroom,  
Curriculum, and the Profession

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SECOND EDITION

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I have focused here on Shakespeare because he remains the primary challenge for most teachers, especially those new to the profession. Obviously most of these strategies would also work with any other play. I use the same techniques, for example, when teaching Arthur Miller's *Crucible*. I have not done so, but I can envision how a powerful class adaptation of Miller's play could be made about the McCarthy era, since Miller himself was using the Puritan past to comment on his Communist present. In fact, Miller has in recent years published new editions of his plays with outstanding essays in them in which he discusses the context in which he wrote them. New editions of the works we teach come out all the time, often with valuable new resources. McDougal-Littell, for instance, in its Literature Connections series, now publishes most of the books commonly taught with "related readings." What is distinctive about these editions is that each includes a range of texts from different cultures and genres that expand the conversation the main work begins.

I always encourage students to dress up for their performances. Costumes create a dramatic space and get kids into character. I have photographs of girls putting lipstick and wigs on tough athletic boys decked out in dresses. As I said earlier, I also like to get outdoors if we can: the classroom is too familiar and too restrained for the volume and movement you hope students will bring to a dramatic performance. I have seen otherwise shy and troubled readers bring a sense of fun and passion to the dramatic reading of Shakespeare, which never fails to move me. The kids know Shakespeare is hard, and for that reason they consider it a formidable achievement if they are able to climb that mountain.

### TEACHING POETIC TEXTS: COURTING THE ELUSIVE MUSE

*A poem is anything said in such a way or put on the page in such a way as to invite from the hearer or reader a certain kind of attention.*

—WILLIAM STAFFORD, *WRITING THE AUSTRALIAN CRAWL*

Poetry was my passport into the world of literature. Few other texts offer so much substance, such rich fare as poems; nor are there many other texts, Shakespeare included, that challenge teachers and, of course, students as much as poetry can. Who wants to teach something that they themselves sometimes find hard to grasp? Surely this just feeds those fires of insecurity in teachers, that fear that our students will one day rise up en masse and shout, "Admit it! *You* don't even know what it means!" I tend to think of poetry less as a wall we must climb than as an invitation, a doorway into the conversation we are trying to have. Billy Collins, during his tenure as America's poet laureat, created Poetry

180, at <[www.loc.gov/poetry/180](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180)>, to change high school students' attitudes toward poetry by bringing into the classroom a poem a day that was meant to be heard, enjoyed, perhaps even discussed—but not studied. Another former poet laureat, Robert Pinsky, established the Americans' Favorite Poem project, at <[www.favoritepoem.org](http://www.favoritepoem.org)>, and produced remarkable videos related to the poems to help explain what the poems meant in general but also to that person in particular.

But the elusive quality of poetry is exactly what intrigues us about it. The students that created the following poem from a selection of words supplied by the teacher, for example, were excited about what they created because they could *feel* something—some meaning—inside the poem that they could not quite name.

Somewhere waiting  
trying to work at your refusal  
failing to reason with your own  
feelings.

Maybe waiting is the obvious  
knowledge.

Forget your old lines  
see the flooding  
see the love ahead  
know what you're waiting for.

—Rhea, Lucas, Julia, and Anthony

The same is true of this found poem Juan Ruiz created while reading Elie Wiesel's novel *Night*:

#### LOSS OF FAITH

I have ceased to pray.

I did not deny  
God's existence,

But I doubted  
His absolute justice.

I was no longer capable  
of lamentation.

I demanded  
an explanation.

My dad passed  
away

There were no prayers  
 at his grave  
 "Blessed by the name of the Eternal"  
 But why should I bless him?  
 —Juan Ruiz

What these students felt was probably the passion that Irish writer Sean O'Casey refers to in his play, *The Shadow of a Gunman*:

If I was you I'd give that game up. It doesn't pay a working man to write poetry. I don't profess to know much about poetry—I don't profess to know much about poetry—about poetry—I don't know much about the pearly glint of the morning dew, or the damask sweetness of the rare wild rose, or the subtle greenness of the serpent's eye—but I think a poet's claim to greatness depends on his power to put passion in the common people. (1969)

Poetry offers the teacher one other benefit that is worth mentioning: the invitation to keep challenging ourselves as readers. Nothing complements a teacher's demanding schedule better than poetry, which can be read while waiting to use the photocopier, while waiting for the faculty meeting to start, while waiting for a parent to show up for a 3:15 meeting.

Poems can be read many ways. The following is one approach, each step of which provides choices depending on what you want to accomplish with the poems you're teaching.

***First, look at the poem's title for some clue as to what it might tell you.*** Sometimes a poem's title won't offer any insight until after you read the poem; nevertheless, treat the title *as part of* the poem, or its first line. If you get a title like Louise Glück's "The Garden," you should immediately ask yourself what place or idea this might allude to (e.g., Eden) as you begin reading.

***Read the poem straight through without stopping to analyze it.*** When reading a poem through the first time, don't be distracted by trying to find meaning—come back later to pick that flower. First read the poem for what it is: a performance, an event, an experience at once personal and musical, private and public.

***Start with what you know.*** I give my students any poem so long as there is at least one phrase that can help them to climb into it. It might

be the last line or some other phrase embedded within the poem. It doesn't matter, so long as there is some toehold within the poem for them to begin the climb toward their own understanding. Sometimes they grab onto an image or onto their own emotional reaction. If the poem makes the reader angry, the first question to be asked is: Why does the poem make you angry?

**Look for patterns.** Patterns in poems might be grammatical, sensory (e.g., a combination of sounds, colors, scents), or object-related, evolving and changing from the beginning to the end of the poem. Edward Hirsch, in his essay "How to Read a Poem," illustrates this notion best with Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," in which the theme of loss changes in scale as the poem unfolds: the car keys lost in the early part of the poem grow into larger objects or abstractions until, in the end, the narrator complains of having lost entire continents and her lover. Other patterns reveal themselves in the architecture of the poem. William Carlos Williams took great pains to arrange his words just so on the page (in part because he wrote many of his poems on the backs of prescription pads!). The reader's charge is to understand the relationship between the different pieces of the pattern.

**Identify the narrator.** Too often we assume that poems are narrated by the poet, unless an alternate voice or persona is clearly established, as in John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. We mistake Charlie Chaplin for the Tramp and Woody Allen for the fool. Louise Glück's poem illustrates the idea well: in "The Garden" the narrator (the "I") could be anyone from God to a neighbor or even a former spouse observing the couple in the garden planting peas. Test the different narrative voices out in a poem to see if the text supports your notion of multiple personae, and be willing to concede that it does not.

**Reflect in writing.** Periodically, stop and write in your journal to help you digest your thoughts. Reflective writing helps you make greater sense of disparate insights while taking you deeper into the poems (and other texts) you have read so many times. This is also an ideal time to model for students how to think through the reading process of a complicated text. The teacher can read aloud to the class from her own reflective writing, explaining her thought process to the class. Students do not know what thinking looks like sometimes, so teachers must show them.

**Read the poem again.** If you haven't read the poem aloud yet, be sure to do that now. It is important to maintain a sense of the poem as a whole, as a complete performance. Too much analysis will cause the

poem to otherwise fall apart in your hands. If a student reads the text aloud but offers no dramatic emphasis, now is a good time to talk about where the moments of emphasis are and how it is possible to find them. Try giving them the poem's entire text, retyped without line breaks. Have the students reconstruct the poem, putting the breaks where they think they should go; then ask them why they broke the lines where they did. (This obviously works a little better with free verse.) A variation: give them the poem without the title at first; then have them brainstorm possible titles and explain why they fit the poem.

*Find the crucial moments.* Often a poem, like a story, has moments when the action shifts, the direction changes, the meaning alters. Billy Collins calls these moments "voltas," a word that derives from the Italian word meaning to jump; it is the moment where the poem (or other literary text) jumps in an unexpected direction. Here is a found poem—that is, a group of words lifted from another medium—I wrote using words from an article in *Harper's Magazine*.

#### SARAJEVO

She apologized for the burnt skins  
on the peppers she made for lunch,  
but,  
she said,  
"that's what happens when you fry  
peppers on a fire  
made from an encyclopedia."

The poem has, arguably, two crucial moments—"but" in the third line and "made from an encyclopedia" in the last line. Both moments change the course of the poem, the final line providing the dramatic shift from the normal, expected, and common to the strange. I sometimes ask students to find the moments of heat or tension within the poem, then we write about what makes these aspects of the work so important.

*Consider form and function.* At certain points, some features of the poem become more apparent and seem more important than they at first did. There are, after all, no accidents in poems: every word is carefully chosen, each line is broken just where the poet decided it must be, all words are arranged in an order that struck the poet as perfect.

This is the point at which a knowledge of poetic elements is helpful and when the teacher should be prepared to introduce or review such terms. In this context, the terms will help explain the poem and, secondarily, illustrate the meaning of the terms themselves. Form and

function shape meaning in most poems and their discussion must not be avoided. Consider the following passage from *Romeo and Juliet* and how the sonnet form of the verse functions to underlie the passage's meaning.

ROMEO: (*to Juliet, touching her hand*)

If I profane with my unworhiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentler sin is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,

Which mannerly devotion shows in this.

For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,

And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers, too?

JULIET: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO: O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET: Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO: Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.

(*He kisses her*)

The student reading this poem must know the sonnet form if he is to appreciate the ballet going on between the two lovers. The alternating lines suggest the back-and-forth play of the young couple, the teasing. All of this culminates when they physically couple in the last two lines—the *couplet*—as they kiss. The poem warrants further discussion for its use of imagery and metaphor. If such elements are ignored, the reader cannot get much further with this or any other poem.

Two other elements that often contribute to the meaning of a poem are repetition and compression. Both are common to most poetry and sometimes play a significant role in shaping the poem's message. *Compression* refers to the way words and images are juxtaposed against or woven into each other, often through the economical use of language (e.g., see how Shakespeare combines images of hands, pilgrims, lips, and prayer in the previous example). *Repetition* implies both rhythm and emphasis, each of which needs to be discussed for a full understanding of any poem.

One last comment about the poem's form. Poet and biographer Paul Mariani, when discussing the work of William Carlos Williams, spoke of the white space surrounding the poem—what I had, until then, considered just the blank, unused part of the page—as part of the text, in the same sense that the empty space of an artist's canvas is an element of a

painting. Sometimes extra space between words is used, as in some of the poems of Muriel Rukeyser, for example, or John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, to convey meaning. The space between stanzas suggests presence—of time passing, scenes changing, and so on—more than absence. So, too, does the space that follows the last word on a line: sometimes that space is like the space between notes in a Miles Davis song—silence or, in this case, white space, a kind of negative moment or sound that may contribute to the poem's meaning. Poets must make great use of their resources, some of which are not immediately apparent to us.

*Look at the language of the poem.* Language is everything in a poem. Words are the poets' medium, their paint, and what they do with them merits serious scrutiny if you are going to understand a poem. It is interesting to note that, despite their resistance to immediate comprehension, poems do not tend to use difficult words; they use words with deep possibilities for meaning.

Many modern poems, written in free verse as they tend to be, depend on grammar and syntax to provide their structure. Here's a poem that illustrates the point well enough; my son Evan dictated it to my wife when he was five.

Midnight Rider (*noun*)  
 ride, ride, ride (*verbs*)  
 through the forest (*prepositional phrase*)  
 over the mountains (*prepositional phrase*)  
 across the river (*prepositional phrase*)  
 Midnight Rider (*noun*)  
 ride, ride, ride. (*verbs*)

Some poets use verbs to do all the work; they begin each line with a verbal phrase that places the emphasis on what the subject is *doing*. Others might use adjectives to surround the main subject of the poem and provide perspective on it. Such structures also provide a rhythmic pattern to the poem, a pattern that sometimes conveys meaning, especially if the poet takes liberties with punctuation.

Punctuation and typography both demand consideration in the reading of a poem. Typographical considerations are rather straightforward: you might ask, for example, "Why did the poet capitalize or italicize that word or phrase?" Punctuation, on the other hand, often remains a nagging source of confusion in a poem: Why doesn't the poet just put a period where there obviously should be one? Guided by the question, "How does it change the meaning of the poem?" try looking, for example, at how the poet runs words together, separating them only by a line break. What you often find, in such instances, is that the blend-



ing of the different lines offers an opportunity for not just different meanings but deeper ones as well. The words begin to rub up against each other, creating semantic possibilities the poet recognizes and chooses to use to convey a full range of meaning. As I said, there are no accidents in poems; therefore, we must, upon encountering patterns we do not immediately understand, consider them from other perspectives. This is another point at which pulling back and rereading a poem through, perhaps aloud, can help you *hear* what the eyes may not be able to see.

*Go deeper or call it quits?* By this time you have achieved a functional—if not solid—understanding of the poem. Depending on the poet and the particular poem, there may not be much more to learn from it, or you may just not have the time for an extensive inquiry. Some poems, especially those we use to supplement discussions of other literature, may not warrant further scrutiny. Other poems may lack emotional depth or thematic complexity.

Some poems, however, do invite further study. Consider, for example, Phyllis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773):

"Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,  
 Taught my benighted soul to understand  
 That there's a God, that there's a Savior too:  
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
 "Their color is a diabolic dye."  
 Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,  
 May be refined, and join the angelic train.

This poem will only begin to reveal its full intelligence to the reader who recognizes Wheatley's use of irony, who senses the wry grin on her face as the poet capitalizes on the different meanings of *benighted soul* (e.g., in the sense of *knight*, as in "regal" or "superior," and *night*, as in "darkness" and "confusion"). Eva Heidemann, a German exchange student in my American lit class, wrote:

Phyllis Wheatley was a slave and sure experienced a lot of bad things in her life. In this poem she is talking about the fact that white people tried to force slaves to their religion, Christianity, and to adopt the white culture. They tried to assimilate them. Wheatley is talking about this whole process in the view of whites so it might sound ironic to black people. Whites taught her "benighted soul" to understand what it means that they tried to force her into their religion and culture. The

black or “sable” race was for the whites something that had to do with the devil. She expresses this by using the words “diabolic dye.” She always talks about redemption, meaning that she would be released and refined from her religion if she would join the whites’ religion. The angelic train in her poem is a symbol for the Anglican Church. Wheatley clearly understood that by using the word *mercy* that whites at her time thought the best thing that could happen to an African was to come to America where they could be cultivated and given the opportunity to “escape” from their “pagan land.”

Though discussion and examination of this poem may yield an understanding of its surface structure, the poem contains a whole range of other, more subtle meanings if you look at its deep structure, as Eva obviously did. This is the point at which it is helpful to turn to other sources to better grasp the source of such a poem’s complexity:

- A good dictionary (e.g., *The Oxford English Dictionary*)
- The Bible (usually the King James Version, the favored translation by poets and writers)
- Other works (literary or artistic) to which the poem may allude

***Return to the title before going on.*** Just as we tell students not to finish an essay without revisiting the initial writing prompt, so the reader should go back to the title of the poem at this point to see what additional information it might offer. This is especially helpful and important if a poem’s title did not make sense to the students before they began reading the poem—as with a title, for example, like Robert Frost’s “Birches.” In such instances, the poet expects the reader to return to the title and consider it as a commentary on or complement to the poem’s meaning.

***Remind yourself why you are having students read this poem in the first place.*** Sometimes we get so involved in the reading of a poem that we forget why we read it in the first place. I use lots of poems, for example, while reading William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. I typically have students do some focused writing in which they build a bridge between the two works and, through their writing, construct their own understanding of the relationship between the two (or more) texts.

***Engage in other activities to help students move beyond particular poems.*** Depending on your objectives and the time available, you might want to consider some of the following activities for further study of poetry in general:

- *Unmagnetic poetry*: Photocopy the poem (ideally enlarging it and using a heavier stock of paper) and cut it up into its lines or words. Students then use these pieces to construct other poems as a

means of manipulating language to better understand what it can and cannot do. When they have finished a poem, have them write it down, and read it aloud or post it in class.

- *Revelation through revision:* In *Deep Revision*, Meredith Sue Willis (1993) shows how to understand a poem by revising it through additions, changes in point of view, or verb tense. Willis writes, "One theory of literature states that what is written is only fully realized when a reader fully receives it, that the reader is, in a way, the true creator of a text." Her chapter, titled "Revising as a Response to Literature," provides a wide range of activities and strategies for manipulating the text of a poem (or story) to better understand its content and structure.
- *Draw your own conclusions:* Fran Claggett and Joan Brown's *Drawing Your Own Conclusions* (1992) shows all the different ways you can render a poetic text into images that help students understand the poem better but also inspire them to create new visual and verbal texts.
- *Perform the poem:* Recast a poem into a ten-minute play in which different parts of the poem are performed and, through these performances, interpreted. Follow up with a discussion of what went on in the performers' minds as they inhabited those different roles, and why they chose to interpret certain lines the way they did.
- *BE the poem:* My colleague Diane McClain has her students pair up and choose different types of poems and poets from different cultures. She rotates this activity throughout the year, changing the demands (e.g., the study of form, then poems from different cultures, and so on). Each pair must perform, then explain, the poem; finally, one of them must *be* the poem and answer students' questions about what it means. Some of the most successful poems are those that allow students from other cultures to translate the text into English and then perform it in both English and their native language. This honors their culture and gives them a moment to shine.

### Sample Sequences

Before moving on, let's look at two different but representative approaches to working with poems in the class. I use both techniques at different times throughout the year. The Weekly Poem, along with the Weekly Paper (see page 165), gives me the chance to bring more poetry into the class on a regular basis while simultaneously focusing on specific aspects of reading, writing, or talking about literary texts. (See Figure 4.18, pp. 84–85.)

## Weekly Poem

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mr. Burke/English

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

*Overview:* Read the poem first to enjoy it. Read it straight on through, *preferably* aloud. Then read it again (and again), looking for any of the following literary devices or features:

- *Language:* tone, style, diction (word choice)
- *Conventions:* punctuation, grammar, poetic forms
- *Devices:* imagery, metaphor, symbols, repetition, and more
- *Design:* structure, organization of content (e.g., stanzas, past to present)
- *Themes:* ideas that run throughout the poem
- *Connections:* How might this relate to the other works we are reading, conversations we are having in class lately?
- *Purpose:* Is the poet trying to explain? Define? Persuade? What, why, and how do they do this?

The front *must* show evidence of close reading—e.g., underlined words, comments, questions, connections, suspected patterns. Your written response (on the back or on a separate sheet of paper) should be **one perfectly written paragraph** (not a loosely written journal-type response) with a clear assertion, supporting details, and examples or quotations from the poem. *Your paragraph must include quotations from the poem.* These quotations must be *embedded*, not left to stand alone.

There is a wonderful video profile of this poem at <<http://www.favoritepoem.org/archive/liang.html>>

I'm Nobody! Who are you? (288)  
by Emily Dickinson

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—Too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!  
How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public—like a frog—  
To tell one's name—the livelong June—  
To an admiring Bog!

FIGURE 4.18 Sample Weekly Poem assignment

Another, more involved approach asks students to read a variety of poems that are somehow related. This assignment develops their ability to read multiple texts for the purpose of comparing and writing about common themes. The assignment accomplishes much more, however, as you can see in Figures 4.19 and 4.20.

### READING TEXTBOOKS: A SAMPLE SEQUENCE

Many teachers use textbooks (i.e., anthologies) as the core text for their course. Such books offer benefits if used effectively, but anthologies can make it easy to be a lazy teacher, allowing us to say, "Read 'The Necklace' on page 24 and do the study questions." For what it's worth, I work alternately with a few different anthologies, depending on what and whom I am teaching:

- *World Writers Today: Contemporary Literature from Around the World* (ScottForesman 1995)
- *Multicultural Voices: Literature from the United States* (ScottForesman 1995)
- *Where Coyotes Howl and Wind Blows Free: Growing Up in the West*, edited by Alexandra R. Haslam and Gerald W. Haslam (University of Nevada Press 1995)
- *The Daybook of Critical Reading and Writing*, Fran Claggett, Louann Reid, and Ruth Vinz (Great Source 1998)
- *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Czeslaw Milosz (Harcourt Brace and Company 1996)
- *The Reader's Handbook: A Student Guide for Reading and Learning*, Jim Burke (Great Source 2002)
- *American Studies Album: Literature, Documents, and Visual Art* (ScottForesman 1995)

Figure 4.21 shows one way to work with anthologies to incorporate collaborative learning, literature circles, and reading strategies to help all students read challenging texts.

### HOW WE READ: A BRIEF EXPLANATION

What goes on when we read, anyway? Let me illustrate with a few examples from my own experience or my classroom's. First, we try to make sense of the textual information as it comes in through our eyes or, if we are listening, our ears. We try to impose order on this stream of words and images by predicting what it means, then checking all subsequent information against this theory or initial understanding. Only when we

## Reading Literature: A Poetic Cycle

*Overview:* This unit asks you to study a collection of poems, focusing on one poem in depth as you teach it to us. The unit concentrates on the close study of literary texts in general and of poems in particular, culminating in a short (one typed page) paper in which you demonstrate your ability to write about themes, embed quotations from multiple texts, and organize your ideas into a coherent paper.

*Standards Connection:* This assignment asks you to learn about and demonstrate your ability to:

- Read poetic texts closely, annotating and responding to such elements as the poet's use of language, imagery, tone, and other devices
- Identify and compare common themes in multiple texts
- Identify and understand the elements of the specific type of poem (e.g., sonnet)
- Make a statement about your theme and support this claim with examples and quotations from the texts
- Identify and embed into your paper appropriate direct quotations
- Present and/or discuss the texts, using details to support your ideas
- Use various note-taking strategies to organize your ideas and quotations and prepare to write a literary essay
- Generate useful questions to help you read, write, and speak
- Write a literary essay

*Guidelines:* Follow these steps to complete this assignment:

1. Read through all and choose *one* of the poems in the packet.
2. Sign up for that poem; no groups may teach the same two poems.
3. Each group, guided by the list of standards above, should study and prepare to present their poem as follows:
  - Read it aloud (well!) *two* times
  - Present it using the overhead to show your thinking and annotations
  - Explicate the poem's meaning and the group's response to it by talking about it, acting it out, or visually representing it (i.e., drawing the action)
4. While each group presents, the others in the class should identify the different themes within the poems and set up the Target Notes tool.
5. Groups should work together to synthesize notes and ideas into a Target Notes tool with "Sonnet Themes" in the middle and a different theme in each strand of the target. Within each strand you must include direct quotations and line numbers (e.g., "18:2" = sonnet 18, line 2).
6. Use your Target Notes and annotated texts to write a one-page paper that:
  - Makes a clear, compelling statement about one of the themes
  - Develops this statement into several paragraphs, each one with its own main idea and supporting examples
  - Includes embedded direct quotations from at least three different poems
  - Uses transitions and other devices to compare what the different poems say about the theme
  - Demonstrates an understanding of and ability to use appropriate conventions (e.g., punctuation, citation, formatting of titles).

FIGURE 4.19 Reading Literature: A Poetic Cycle sample handout

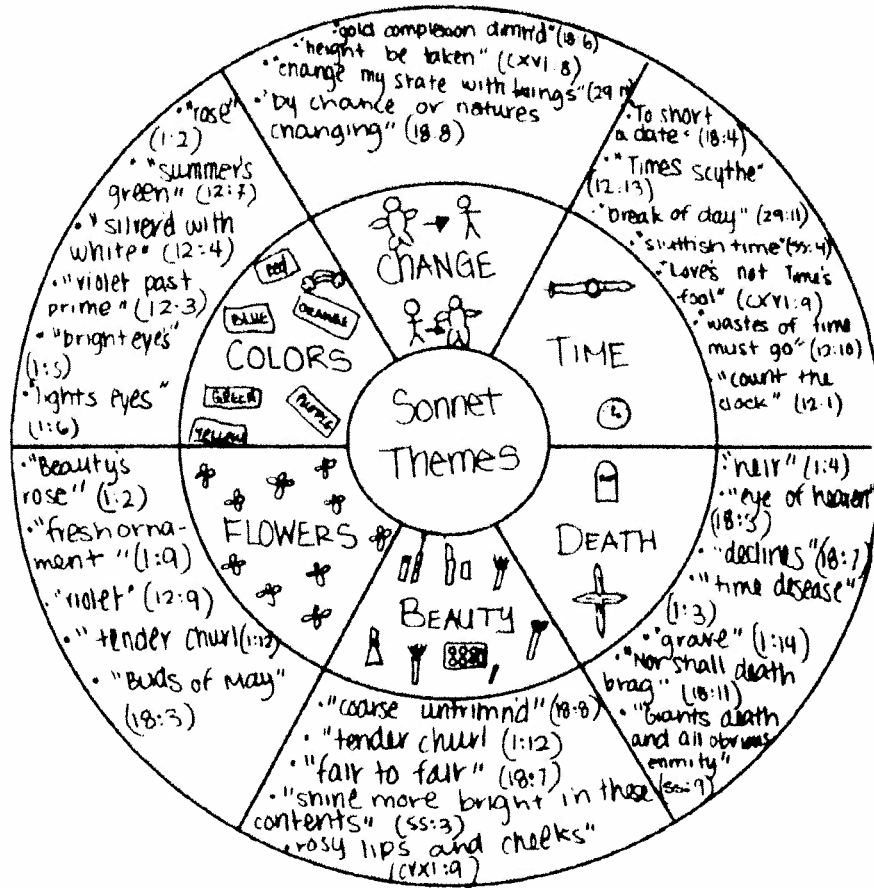


FIGURE 4.20 Sandy Borelli's Sonnet Themes Target

encounter information in the text that does not agree with our assumptions do we stop to reevaluate our understanding. For instance, I was listening to an audio recording of South African writer Nadine Gordimer's novel *None to Accompany Me* while driving to work. I grabbed the wrong tape from the box without realizing it and popped it in. I had been distracted while much of the book was being read to me, so it did not surprise me much when the new tape made no sense. But the more I listened to what I thought was Chapter 3 (it was actually Chapter 9!), the more confused I got: here were characters I had not met talking about events I had not heard of with people I clearly did not know. When, a day later, I changed the tape again—not having caught my sixty-mile-per-hour mistake—it turned out to be the tape I originally needed. Suddenly the text made sense!

## Reading Literature Unit

### Burke/Spring

*Overview:* This unit has several important goals, all of which are based on the state standards. Be sure that each student takes notes, as you will be graded individually, though you will also be evaluated for your group's work. I expect this unit to take approximately three weeks. By the unit's end, you should know and be able to:

- Read different types of **literature** organized around a **unifying theme**
- Write about this **theme** using details and quotes from the different texts you read to support your **thesis**
- Take **useful** notes that will help you understand and prepare you to write about what you read
- Discuss, in groups and with the entire class, your **reading process** and **interpretations**
- Write about literature using appropriate **conventions** (e.g., always write in present tense when writing about literature)
- Identify the **essential** components of each **genre** (e.g., plot, theme, character, etc.; but also style, tone, voice, devices)

*Step One: Survey* the textbook to familiarize yourself with it. Complete the Textbook Evaluation sheet. In order to expedite this portion, you can complete it as a group.

*Step Two:* Begin your note making with a list of comments and/or questions about the book and its contents. Look at the title and the contents.

*Step Three:* Read the foreword. Take notes on the following questions. Be sure to jot down examples in your notes

- What **purpose** does a foreword serve?
- How is a foreword different from a **preface**, **introduction**, and **prologue**?
- How is a foreword similar to a **preface**, **introduction**, and **prologue**?
- Be **specific**: What is the author of this foreword trying to accomplish? Why do you think that? What examples can you provide to support your **assertion**?

*Step Four:* Get into groups of four people. Once your group is set up, skim through the table of contents. Each unit in the book is **organized** around a theme. Decide which unit your group wants to focus on, then sign up for that unit on the whiteboard. *Note:* No two groups may study the same unit.

*Step Five:* Before you begin reading the poems and stories in the unit, have a discussion about the **theme**. All members should take notes during and after this discussion. If, for example, the unit is titled "The Need to Succeed," you should ask questions like these:

- What does it mean to "succeed"?
- Do we really "need" to succeed?
- Why do we feel this need?
- What do we need in order to succeed?
- How would the world be different if we did not feel this need?
- What does success cost us?
- If one succeeds, does the other necessarily "fail"?
- Is succeeding the same as winning?

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FIGURE 4.21 Reading Literature Unit sample handout



*Step Six:* Follow these steps for all of the selections in your unit:

1. Choose the next selection (e.g., the story or poem you will all read next). Give the group an assignment (example: "Everyone needs to finish this poem and have your initial notes done by the end of the period," or "Get this done for homework tonight so we can do the next step tomorrow").
2. Brainstorm possible meanings and implications based on the title or any other clues you might have. (*Everyone should take notes throughout this process.*)
3. Read the assigned text.
4. As you read, make notes—ask questions, jot down examples, write observations—about patterns, themes, tone, style, point of view, or other aspects of the story that seem important. Consider using one of the following note-making methods we have studied:
  - Reporter's Notes
  - Cornell Notes
  - Episodic Notes
  - Sensory Notes
  - Interactive Notes
5. Write one perfect paragraph about each poem or story in the unit. In this paragraph, you must do the following:
  - Have a clear **topic sentence** that establishes a connection between this poem/story and the theme of the unit. **Example:** Success comes in many forms, however, as the story "Good Day for Banana Fish" proves.
  - Write in the **present tense**.
  - Include at least two examples or quotes from the story. These should support or develop the connection between this story and the unit theme.
  - Explain, in separate sentences, how these quotes relate to both the topic sentence and the theme of the unit.

**Note:** Each student must complete all written assignments and read all texts in the unit.

*Step Seven:* Prepare to run a fishbowl discussion about your unit's theme. A successful discussion will demonstrate your ability to:

- Understand and discuss what you read
- **Develop** and **support** an idea, using examples from different texts
- Explain your ideas to others to help them understand your interpretation of the story
- Make connections between what you read, the world around you, and your own or others' lives

*Step Eight:* Write an essay about a theme in literature. Using the notes you've taken, write an essay that explores the theme of your unit (e.g., "the need to succeed"). This essay must:

- Be typed, double-spaced, and written in a **12-point serif font** with 1.25-inch margins
- Be at least three typed pages
- Include a properly formatted bibliography page (does not count as one of the three pages!) citing all the different poems and stories in your unit, as well as the textbook itself
- Have a properly formatted cover page

*Deadlines:* This paper, complete with drafts and notes, will be due on Wednesday, February 21<sup>st</sup>. The discussions mentioned in Step Seven will take place the week of February 12<sup>th</sup>.

*Assessment:* You will receive two grades: one an individual grade based solely on the quality of your final written work; the second one determined by your contribution to the group.

The reading process requires that we use our own experiences and knowledge about the world to help us further understand the book. However, everything changes over time. We cannot read the same book twice, to adapt Heraclitus' famous maxim. These personal biases or experiences tend to profoundly shape our interpretation of the text, blinding us sometimes to other, equally valid readings or important details. Perhaps my most personal reading experience came while teaching *Hamlet* to a class of seniors the year after my father died. During the time I taught the play, my mother began to date other men for the first time since my father's death. This confused me and allowed me to identify closely with Hamlet throughout the reading of the play. My own feelings were so raw at the time that they interfered with other readings I might otherwise have come up with.

Students often react to books or elements of the books they read. We have so many students with personal "issues" in our classes these days. Others are simply going through phases of personal evolution that can either confuse or inspire them when they encounter the text. Tracy, a young woman in my junior class, had some trouble at home with her parents and, after reading the chapter of *Huckleberry Finn* in which Huck decides to run away from his dad, got in her car and took off for Santa Cruz for a weekend without telling her parents. She stayed at a friend's house to talk things through. She was back at school Monday, I am thankful to say. Laurel, another student of mine, had a hard time focusing on any other aspect of the novel than Huck's father's cruelty, since the previous week her mother had thrown her out of the house for reasons that were not at all clear to Laurel.

Finally, while reading we often encounter passages that we simply cannot understand. My students often have trouble reading Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* because it assumes a familiarity not only with South African customs and apartheid but with certain stories from the Bible. In addition, the book's writing is idiosyncratic, offering typographic as well as stylistic variations they have not previously encountered. This point characterizes the trouble many of my students have with texts we read, some of which can be chalked up to the inability to "see" what is happening, and some of which is related to the cognitive disorientation they feel, caused by a lack of knowledge or information.

Let me illustrate the process in a more practical way by providing a sequence for reading a short story that emphasizes the three phases of the reading process: before, during, and after. (See Appendix C.)

## PROFILES OF READERS

Having considered, however briefly, the reading process, let me offer a more concrete profile of three different types of readers before looking at