Practical Poetry

A Nonstandard Approach to Meeting Content-Area Standards

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## Contents

**FOREWORD** ................................................................. ix

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ................................................... xi

**INTRODUCTION** .......................................................... xiii

1  *Practical Poetry: A Rationale* ................................. 1

2  *Language Arts* ....................................................... 8

3  *Math and Poetry: Birds of a Feather* ....................... 57

4  *Science and Poetry: A Rose by Any Other Name* ........ 88

5  *Social Studies and Poetry: And Justice for All* ......... 125

**EPILOGUE: Always Have an Agenda** ............................ 169
A Poet’s Self-Edit Checklist

1. *Have I written from one pair of shoes?* Often first drafts appear to be speaking from more than one perspective, perhaps beginning in first person, switching midstream to second person, and ending up in some philosophical third-person summary (*I hate anchovies/Anchovies make you sick/Anchovies are stinko*). Check that the poem has only one point of view.

2. *Have I narrowed the focus?* If I have chosen to write about a larger issue (love, war, death, the environment), have I tried to narrow the focus to one moment? Broad poems can divide like amoebas into clear, sharp images when the poet narrows the focus.

3. *Have I defined all of my opinion words (aka subjective terms)?* Words, such as *weird, gorgeous, lovely, lively, crazy,* and so on, all need to be defined in concrete terms so that the reader can visualize the poet’s image. *Crazy as
what? Gorgeous because? Does my poem describe the sunset in such a way that I don’t have to even say it was gorgeous—did I show rather than tell?

4. Have I double-checked the basics? Subject-verb agreement? Present, future, or past tense (choose one)? Spelling?

5. Have I worked to get the trite out? Get rid of phrases and aphorisms that are so common that they have lost their meaning in concrete terms: *cold as ice, screamed like a hyena, beauty is as beauty does.* Such phrases are annoying enough when Mom uses them and even worse in poetry. What does the phrase really mean—can I reword it in an original way?

6. Have I practiced cutting out excess words? What happens if I arbitrarily delete one-quarter or one-third of the words? Poetry is economical communication; am I saving wherever possible?

7. Have I read the poem aloud to see if it flows and makes sense? Yea, verily, thy convoluted language shall be stricken! Talk the poem out—ask, Is this something I would say or my narrator would say?

8. Does the poem contain any fake rhymes? A fake rhyme is like a fake smile—anyone can spot a phoney. A rhyme that was chosen for rhyme’s sake, not the sake of the message (*The ocean is my storage tank/Where I go to fish with Hank*), makes for a weak poem. Can I rearrange the poem to get rid of forced, fake, or too predictable rhymes?

9. Have I used action verbs to clarify images? Can I substitute verbs that move for words like *is, are, went, came,* and so on?

10. Was I consistent to the pattern I chose? A lot of poetry is about putting details into a pattern. Patterns should
remain consistent as they play in the background of the poem. If the pattern breaks in one point, it will draw the focus of the reader to that broken place. Writers break a pattern in the middle of a poem only if the purpose is to attract the readers’ attention.

11. *Did I maintain a clear and consistent image?* Were descriptive words used, including comparisons such as simile and metaphor? This is the poetic version of a home run: Can the reader picture what is in the poem? Let the poem cool off overnight, look at it again with the eyes of a stranger, and ask, Can I picture this?

12. *Have I shared my poem with another person?* The poem needs to speak independently. A poem that needs an explanation is like a joke that needs footnotes—it’s not working. If I have to go beyond explaining the inspiration of the poem to saying, What I meant here was, then the poem needs rehabilitation; it can’t walk without crutches.
Over the Top: Measurements Poems

“Mathematics is a verb, not just a noun,” says Sherman K. Stein, professor of mathematics at the University of California. He points out that in reading mathematics, nothing can be skipped. In other words, we can’t skim the math chapter as we might an article on the sports page, skipping the words we don’t know, attempting to absorb the general meaning. While it is the responsibility of the author to make mathematical arguments clear, it is the responsibility of the reader to play an active role in understanding the text by reading carefully and knowing the meaning of every term. “Oh, close enough,” is not the phraseology of brain surgery or math—both require precision. Mathematics
“must be read word by word, symbol by symbol.” The math teacher, then, has to be concerned with student comprehension of vocabulary.

The measurement standards are broken down into two main categories: understanding units and systems of measurement and choosing the right tools and formulas to determine measurements. Seems simple enough—as long as students are familiar with the terms and the language of measurement. The following exercises are designed to help students practice using math terminology to further their comprehension and to help teachers assess their capabilities—and hopefully to have a little fun in the process.

**Greater Than/Less Than**

I could improve my Scrabble game in a major way if I could manage to memorize all those weird little words incorporating j, x, or z. And I’ve tried, I’ve really tried. But since I have very little call to use words like azo in my life, they evaporate quicker than cheap cologne. We need to put new terms into practice for them to stick. I’m going to make a quantum leap here and speculate that this is also true when it comes to math symbols. In this exercise, students incorporate math symbols in a poem describing themselves.

♦ Have students divide a piece of paper in half lengthwise, making two columns.

♦ In one column, have them list things they are greater than, in the other column, things they are less than. Encourage precision and humor. They are trying to reinforce the learning of greater than/less than by putting themselves in the picture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greater Than</th>
<th>Less Than</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a sparrow</td>
<td>an elephant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my toothbrush</td>
<td>the gymnasium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this stapler</td>
<td>a tank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, have them substitute symbols for the words greater than/less than to create a list poem.

I'm > a sparrow, but < an elephant.
I'm > my toothbrush, but < the gym.
I'm > this stapler, but < a tank.

Have students share their poems with one another.

Ask students to save the poems in their math notebooks or journals. As new symbols are learned (equal to, not equal to, etc.), have the students add to the poem throughout the year. It’s fun to get ridiculous with these, as long as it can be determined that the student actually comprehends the symbol.

Assess by having students trade papers. If the reader disagrees with the author, the author should be able to provide an argument to support her theory of greater than/less than.

The Benchmark Is Me!

At Center Street Elementary School in Mentor, Ohio, the fifth grade was studying measurement. Included in this unit are the symbols for (and concepts of) greater than and less than, along with a new word: benchmark. If we assume that at the beginning of the school year, head still full of chlorine from the city pool, the average fifth grader understands a benchmark to be the creases left on the back of her legs after sitting too long on the bleachers, writing a poem using benchmark helps unlock the mystery of its mathematical meaning.

And what better way to unlock a mystery than to create a riddle? Using the greater than/less than model and a common tag line, Frankie (age eleven) created this riddle poem:

> an eraser but < an elephant
> an atom but < a house
> a pencil but < a cow
< a blue whale > a mouse

Can’t you see?
The benchmark is me!
After creating poems using the new word and listening to classmates’ poems, it’s doubtful any student will ever forget what benchmark means.

- Have students write their poems using themselves as the benchmarks.
- Have students share their poems aloud in small groups and then with the class as a whole.
- Try this exercise with other math vocabulary words. Students can have fun making up poems to go with the following taglines:
  
  The remainder is me!
  The sum is me!

- Assess students’ ability to follow the pattern of the poem incorporating and showing an understanding of the symbols and the meaning of a mathematical term.

**Benchmark II: The Sequel**

Now that you have the basics, get a little creative with your riddles.

- Change the benchmark from a fifth grader to, say, that colossal pine tree on the corner. How does that change the content of the poem? (Okay, I picked tree because it rhymes with see. You or your students can come up with something even better—and more measurable.)

  > a pine cone < a redwood
  > a squirrel < a mountain
  > a candy bar < the ocean
  Can’t you see?
  The benchmark is a pine tree!
Benchmark III: The Saga Continues

- What if you look at greater than/less than comparisons in terms of circumference? length? speed? Every time you change the criteria or the benchmark, you create a new poem.

- As you move through the unit on measurement, ask students to create a riddle poem for each new term they encounter and staple them together in a book called My Measurement Poems, creating a keepsake reminder of new terms.

Benchmark IV: Variables?

You mean the answers to these problems aren’t cast in stone? I thought there was always a right and a wrong in math. Are you telling me we can change the rules when the problem is in the air?

Okay. This is personal. My approach to variables is the result of a grudge match I had with Miss London in junior high. It was one of the most difficult lessons for me to learn in math and is perhaps a benchmark in my decline in the field.

To a kid (me, for instance) raised on fact sheets and dittos, the whole concept of problems with variables didn’t fit. Remember those endless sheets of problems with the purple print that smelled funny and smeared under sweaty hands? I liked those. They were quick homework, good for a check in the grade book, and you could watch Disney on Sunday nights and do them at the same time. I was a star at worksheets. Sometimes the teacher would even let me use the key and correct those of other kids. Or we would trade the worksheets and she’d put the answers on the board. The important thing about math was, the answer was either right or wrong.

So when I hit the middle grades and poor Miss London, with her wide turquoise eyes, tried to introduce the concept of variables to me in terms of letter symbols, I protested. What do you mean, if we add a to x, what happens to y? Who knows? What am I, a mind reader? Who cares about x? Put him back in the drawer.
I like the letter a better, anyway. It’s bigger than y, case closed. Variables? What is this, a joke?

- Go back to the greater than/less than poems and ask students to add a variable they can picture, an image that will help them visualize the mathematical concept. Adding variables to poems makes for some fun creative writing while reinforcing a basic math concept and visualizing problem solving.

- Ask the students under what circumstances a kid could be bigger than a colossal pine tree. What kind of variable would make this equation true? In other language: me + x > colossal pine tree. (Possible answers might include a chain saw, stilts, a jet pack, or climbing the ladder limbs of the pine tree up to the top and shoving a fist in the air above its spire.)

- Have the students choose one greater than/less than line out of their poems and rewrite, incorporating a variable. Can a person be greater than a pine tree but less than a pencil? What variables might make that possible?

- Assess the students’ understanding of the meaning and use of the word variable.

**Number and Operations Standard**

Helps students compute fluently and make reasonable estimates; develop fluency in adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing whole numbers; use fractions and decimals in situations relevant to students’ experience; use a visual model; and add and subtract commonly used fractions and decimals. Causes students to develop and use strategies to estimate the results of rational-number computations, estimate equivalent ratios, and judge the reasonableness of the results.
The Questioning Poem

I tell kids that mostly I write about two things—what I know and what I wonder about. That wondering is not only the first step in what we have come to call the writing process but also the first step in the scientific process.

Poets and scientists ask questions. How could this be? Why does that happen? What follows next? How do we use our knowledge so that we can learn to predict? What is our conclusion? Lots of questions. Also, both must have a keen eye for observation, for data collection, and for comparisons. Both must be very careful about definitive language.

What’s that about? is a great source of motivation to poets, scientists, pencil tappers, and gum poppers. Kids are more inclined to find and remember the answers to what they want to know as opposed to simply what their teachers want them to know, which is why many teachers begin units with a series of questions. Casting questions in the form of a poem for classroom sharing gives a surprising kick to a reliable jump-start.

Writing a questioning poem involves four simple steps: initial inquiry, collection and cataloging of data, collaborative writing, and presentation.

◆ Share my questioning poem (or another example) on an overhead and discuss.

◆ Divide your class into groups of four to eight students.

What’s the Point?

What is the purpose in existing?
Why am I alive?
Answers I was searching for
in my closet at 8:05.
It was just a normal morning,
derelaxed, overslept.  
Alarmed into racing around—
I wasn’t looking where I stepped.

How do trees recover from winter?
How do snowbirds find their way?
Has the sun ever been grounded?
What’s the meaning of today?

School should answer certain questions,
like, why’s the ocean blue?
Who invented morning?
And
why’d the cat throw up in my shoe?

—SARA HOLBROOK,
The Dog Ate My Homework
Give each group a stack of index cards and ask them to write down questions about a unit of study. (Katie’s students were about to start a unit on alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.) Encourage the students to write as many questions as they can, without attribution—one question to a card. Pile the cards in the center of each group’s table.

Give each group a sheet of paper and ask one student to assume the role of scribe.

Have the groups compile a poem using the questions written on the index cards. To do so, they will need to collect and prioritize their data and write collaboratively. Remind the writers that most scientific papers, like a lot of other writing from television sit-coms to annual reports, are collaborative efforts. People have to work together to hash things out.

Ask the writers to come up with a way, as a group, to present their poem to the rest of the class. Ideas include turning it into a skit, adding rhythm, creating a song, taking turns reading various lines.

Have students present their poems to the class. Two rules: 1. Everyone must participate. 2. Obey school rules. (No setting the room on fire or insulting fellow students.)

Assess students’ ability to collaborate and participate and their ability to formulate relevant questions based on prior (even if inaccurate) knowledge.

Katie’s classroom was divided into three working groups who dubbed themselves the No Names, the Don’t Knows, and the Wiggles. Naming the groups gave each an instant sense of community identity, reinforcing one of the unifying concepts of the standards—students should work more in groups (and less as individuals) to analyze and synthesize data.

**Standards**

Unifying concepts and processes. Combines scientific inquiry with writing and provides students with a big picture of why a given topic is important.

A. Science as inquiry. Engages students in identifying questions that can be answered through scientific investigations, helps students formulate questions that are relevant and meaningful, begins to build a community of learners as students collaborate, engages students in questioning and querying other students, and raises awareness that ideas are to be presented in oral and/or written reports.

F. Science in personal and social perspectives. Provides a foundation for students’ appreciation of the importance of personal health, here as applied to the hazards of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. (This can be expanded to include other standards when the exercise is used with other topics.)
Why are cigarettes so addicting?
What’s in them that makes you can’t stop?
Are illegal drugs sold in the store
just like pop?
Can you tell people to stop their drugs
even if they’re your friends?
Is it dangerous, is it safe,
what if the friendship ends?
Are there a lot of bad drugs in this world?
If so, what for?
And here’s another question we have,
how come people want more?
Do drugs affect the way you talk,
eat, sleep, and think?
Can you turn different colors with drugs—
blue, orange, or even pink?
Questions, questions are what we have,
and they never seem to stop.
Hopefully we can get some answers,
from a parent, teacher, or a cop.
—The No Names

Four No Names took turns reading the poem while the remaining three acted it out; the performance culminated in a dramatic conclusion in which they all ran offstage screaming like sirens.

Drugs, Alcohol, Tobacco
Why are these so bad?
Why were they invented?
To start this filthy fad?
Why do people take them
Even though it kills?
Why so many ways?
Injections, tablets, pills
Selling, buying, taking
Makes me have a rude awakening.
Why is this happening?
What should I do?
—The Don’t Knows
The Don’t Knows had a two-student rhythm section, a single reader, and three students acting out the poem.

Who makes drugs?
When were they cool?
How do they kill you?
I wish not smoking was a rule.
What is in alcohol that makes you go nuts
And makes you want to throw up your guts?
When did they find out drugs are bad?
Now I guess there [sic] not a fad.
What’s the difference between drugs and tobacco?
I don’t know, but they both make you wacko.
So answer me this . . .
Who makes drugs?

—The Wiggles

The Wiggles had a one-student rhythm section (he beat a ruler on a book) backing up a single reader. The rest of the group, snapping their fingers, acted out certain passages. For a finale, they all held up their palms on which they had written antidrug messages.

Following the presentations (and torrents of applause) we talked a little about what poets and scientists might have in common. Some of the student responses were:

When you write, you think of different questions.

Poetry helps people find new ideas.

Poetry in science means that learning can be fun.

We get to work together in both.

One student summed up the discussion by remarking that writing a poem in science is “not just looking at the overhead and taking notes,” adding, “It’s better to do it than to read it in a book.” The class response was immediate and unanimous—everyone agreed.
Pleased with the results of the exercise, Katie made sure to provide scientific answers in subsequent lessons to questions such as “What is it about alcohol that makes you sick?” and “How do drugs kill you?” Not only did these poems help assess students’ prior knowledge, but they also put a little oil on the wheel of their curiosity.

Dreaming Up More Questions

“Stuck Here” is another model of a questioning poem (see page 99). It is a little about gravity and a lot about daydreaming. I may be going out on a limb here, but I’d venture that many students are more familiar with daydreaming than they are with gravity. But we can’t cross off daydreams as useless. Any scientist or artist will tell you that daydreams about what is and what is not possible are the impetus of creative exploration.

In this exercise you can combine standards A and B with a lesson on physical, life, earth, or space science, or on the history of science, depending on your unit of study. Say today’s lesson is not on gravity, as it is in “Stuck Here.” Let’s say it’s on photosynthesis. Or oceans. Or microscopes. Or forest fires. Anything the kids can imagine being with or without and predict what the outcome would be. The object is to rewrite the poem, completing it with questions about the unit.

◆ Share the poem “Stuck Here” with students and discuss the pattern of the poem.

◆ Have students break into small groups and formulate questions that relate to your current unit of study. Tell them to let their imaginations run wild. What would life be like if there weren’t such a thing as a skeletal system? Electricity?

◆ Ask them to arrange these questions using “Stuck Here” as a model, rewriting the poem complete with their personal
(often misguided and fictional) questioning daydreams.

- Be sure to provide time to share the poems.
- Assess students’ appreciation of the benefits of their topic and their logic in inferring what life would be like with and without it.

As I Was Saying, Precisely!

The experiment took too long. / The experiment took two hours and forty-five minutes longer than the last time.

The snowfall last night was delightful. / Four inches of snow fell last night and blanketed the bushes and trees.

Nothing wrong with a good opinion. I have plenty of them. (Don’t get me started.) But if we want to use opinion words (subjective terms) in our science writing or in our poetry, we’d better be prepared to back them up with explanations. We commonly think of scientific writing as precise, given to mathematical equations and detailed descriptions and explanations. Poetry is just as demanding, challenging the poet to define subjective observations with images and comparisons.

Any time an opinion is stated in a poem, we have to define it. It is not good enough to write, “My brother is weird.” Like Ed McMahon, we have to ask, “How weird is he?” Does he have a wart on his nose? The skin of a reptile? The poem “Hopeless” (see page 101) illustrates this point; it puts forward an opinion—“My dad is so stupid”—and then goes on to provide details.
Most opinions are a matter of perspective. Whether liver tastes bad or good is a matter for one’s palate. Whether something is small or large depends on where one stands in the universe:

- Large tree.
- Small me.
- Large me.
- Small flea.

Kids tend to use broad terms for descriptions. Words like large and small or short or easy or hard have little or no meaning in a scientific or poetic context (hard like algebra or hard like this tabletop?).

- Huge tree.
- Puny me.

When I ask kids to rewrite a poem like this, they first believe they are being more precise by saying something like:

- Tall me.
- Minuscule flea.

Maybe the student is proud because she used a thesaurus to come up with the word minuscule. Unfortunately, that word tells the reader very little. Both the poet and the scientist would be looking for something more precise, more visual:

- 50-foot tree.
- 5-foot me.
- .05-millimeter flea.

To improve scientific writing, we have to define our opinions with facts, but before we can do that, we have to be able to recognize subjective terms when we drop them in our writing. According to the science standards, “students often have the
vocabulary for many aspects of health, but they often do not understand the science related to the terminology.” Kids are readily able to tell us that physical exercise is good and being a couch potato is bad, but they often need some nudging to take their writing to the next level—to clarify why this is so.

- Make a spreadsheet naming a “good” food. Have students turn their papers sideways and divide them into six columns. At the top of five of the columns have them name a description or characteristic for the “good” food. (Don’t define “good” as healthy or unhealthy, yummy or nasty—you’re trying to teach a good point here.) (See Figure 4–1, where Frankie describes his good food—pie.)

- Share the poem “Hopeless” with students. Identify the opinion words used to describe the dad in the poem: stupid, dumb, and hopeless (sorry, Dad). Discuss how the poem defines the opinion words so that they have meaning. Practice your best imitation of Ed McMahon and ask after the each of the first two lines, How stupid is he? How dumb is he? This helps underscore how the poem answers these questions.

---

**Hopeless**
My dad is so stupid. My dad is so dumb. He calls the wrong name when he wants me to come.

He calls me Barbara–Bob–Stacey, and I answer, “Who?”

Then he slaps at his forehead and yells, “Number 2!”

“You’re hopeless,” I tell him, and then he gets riled. But what gives when a man does not know his own child?

—SARA HOLBROOK, Nothing’s the End of the World

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pie</th>
<th>crusty</th>
<th>tasty</th>
<th>sweet</th>
<th>filled with tasty fruits</th>
<th>fattening</th>
<th>health benefits?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shortening</td>
<td>sugar salt</td>
<td>sugar fruits</td>
<td>apples pears cherry</td>
<td>sugar calories</td>
<td>Quick energy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>juice</td>
<td>strawberry blueberry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>rasberry pecan</td>
<td>sugar</td>
<td>vitamins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pie of love</td>
<td>syrup</td>
<td></td>
<td>cream</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Protein</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIG. 4–1 Frankie’s Spreadsheet**
Have students turn to their “good food” spreadsheet and ask them to cover the name of their “good” food. Are they able to guess the food by just looking at the descriptors? Have they been specific enough or have they just listed opinions? Probably the latter. Most examples will be broadly stated and full of opinions needing definition. Such descriptors lack the “rich explanatory power” recommended for scientific writing, but they can lead the way to a meaningful learning experience—a (pardon me) “fruitful investigation” and a descriptive poem.

Ask students to choose one of their “good foods” and list more precise descriptors. Have them title the sixth column “possible health benefits.” This is where they’ll need to do some research to determine what it is that makes pie (or whatever) tasty, sweet, and (sigh) fattening. How sweet is it? What makes it sweet? What are the ingredients? How does pie get crusty? Does pie have any health benefits?

When students have completed the new charts, have them check to make sure they have not substituted one opinion word for another—for example, tasty for delicious. The characteristics should now explain the opinions expressed in the first spreadsheet.

Have students use the second chart to compose a riddle poem about their chosen food. These poems should be mouthwatering. Here is sixth-grader Frankie’s finished poem: The pie is no longer just “tasty,” he has provided an explanation. As you read it, can you guess it is about a pie?

Baked at 450, apples and cream, raspberry syrup, oh what a dream. Crusty and sweet from shortening and sugar. It’s a good pastry I eat with ice cream, oh so tasty. The only downside to this treat is all the fat, who cares. Let’s eat.

After students have written and polished their poems, ask them to share them as a class or in small groups. Tell them
to save the title for last: Can the class guess what food the poem is about before the author reveals the title?

◆ Assess the students’ ability to distinguish between fact and opinion in describing the characteristics of a food, research and organize their data in a spreadsheet, and incorporate those details into a piece of creative writing, justifying their opinions with specific explanations.

“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action...”
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, Hamlet (1601)

**Standards**

A. Science as inquiry. Develops students’ abilities to center on evidence rather than personal explanations, to differentiate explanation from description.

B. Physical science. Provides an opportunity for students to learn how the motions of an object can be described by its position, direction of motion, and speed.
It’s Not Fair!

Kids of all ages have views on what they see as fair and not fair. In fact they are pretty clear about it. It isn’t until we start to get some years on us that all that black and white starts to fade into shades of gray. Change that has come about in the world often has happened as a result of some kind of compromise, not all of which is fair to all parties, including other species and the environment. One way to engage kids in current or past events is to have them try to determine what’s fair and what’s not from different points of view.

It is our right and responsibility as citizens to have opinions on issues beyond the next bug-crunching reality television series and whatever future inanities various media see fit to foist on us. And citizens must be able to express these opinions coherently, logically, and in an informed way. (How’s that for soapbox oratory?) In this activity, students are going to let loose with some political opinions. And if you think kids aren’t interested in anything beyond the new releases at the video store, they just may surprise you.

I was working with a group of eighth graders at Gompers Secondary School in San Diego the month prior to the beginning of the war in Iraq. I began by passing out index cards to the class and having each student complete this sentence on his or her card: It’s not fair that . . . Responses looked like a page from the editorial section of the Los Angeles Times:

- It’s not fair that women do not get to receive more privileges like men do.
- It’s not fair that men get more attention and better jobs than women do.
- It’s not fair that gas prices went up.
- It’s not fair that people stereotype all teenagers as careless people and smokers.
- It's not fair that I always get blamed for something my little sister does because I’m older and my mom says, “You shouldn’t let her do that.”
- It’s not fair that people make fun of gays and lesbians.
- It’s not fair that Osama Bin Laden is still alive.
- It’s not fair that Michael Jackson is getting picked on.
- It’s not fair that the war threat is getting bigger.
- It’s not fair that we have to worry about war.
- It’s not fair that little kids can’t walk home from school without getting attacked.
- It’s not fair that there are abortions in the world.

How about that for a summary of current events for March of 2003?

- Pass out index cards or scraps of paper and have students complete the sentence, It’s not fair that ___________. To expand their ability to research current events, you may wish to have them use newspapers and magazines to spark ideas.
- Post the cards around the room.
- Have the kids, in pairs, “shop” for a topic of interest to both parties. (This takes a while; it is an initial experiment in compromise.)
- After student pairs have identified a topic, have each pair rip a single sheet of paper in half lengthwise, each taking a half.
- Ask each member of the writing team to choose a point of view from which to write. (Even though they have agreed on the topic, they can still take different points of view.) For instance, if the topic is “It’s not fair that gas prices went up,” one student could take the point of view of a driver of an
SUV and one could take the point of view of a gas station owner who is tired of getting yelled at. (In the class in San Diego, one pair of girls decided to write about the 2003 impending war in Iraq. One chose the point of view of a mother, the other that of Uncle Sam.)

- Have them, working independently, make a list of arguments defending their points of view. It is important for each student to assume the identity of the character chosen, try on his shoes, speak in her voice.

- Have two students read a poem for two voices aloud to the class. (See sidebar examples, one for younger kids “Adrenaline” and one for middle schoolers “We Own This Town”. Plenty more are available in your library. For a start, look in Paul Fleishman’s Newbery award–winning book Joyful Noise; there are more in my book Wham! It’s a Poetry Jam. Political poems for elementary kids are tough to come by, so it’s up to them to create their own in class. You could use one of the next student samples.)

I wrote the following poem with a friend of mine, Anthony Rucker, who goes by the stage name of Da Boogie Man. He is twenty years younger than I am, African American, and big enough to play center on a professional football team. To say that we look at the world from different points of view is an understatement. We first performed this poem at the National Poetry Slam in 1995. Fresh from my work experience at the law firm, I had this notion that some of the corporate criminals I had come to know were no more than gang members in seventeen-hundred-dollar suits. So I wrote a short poem about it. Boogie cut the poem up in pieces and interspersed his own stanzas

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**Adrenaline**

Made you run.
Made you run.

Thanks a lot adrenaline.

Stop your whining,
I got you there.

Yeah. Like a panting dog
with stand-up hair.

You would have arrived
sometime next week.

You blew my cool.
You made me freak.

I like to push you
to the max.

Great.
Now take a hike
and I’ll relax.

—SARA HOLBROOK,
By Definition
about gangs from a different perspective and gave it back to me. We continued to trade back and forth until we had essentially what you see here (the original, which has a few controversial words in it, is in my *Chicks Up Front* book).

**We Own This Town**

> From downtown to the suburbs,  
> the streets are mine.  
> People complain, but they all want me  
> to do what I do.  
> Stores get insurance claims,  
> people have someone to blame,  
> and cops get to keep their jobs.

So you want to be one of the gang down at the Union Club.  
Boy, you've got to change your . . . colors.  
Our colors are gray and . . . white.

> I do what I'm forced to do, if I had other options  
> I'd make other choices.  
> But now, I choose to survive.

It's survival of the fittest, downtown,  
no welfare programs here, it's natural selection.  
We are the corporate heads and  
out of our hats come the names of  
who and what's going to work in this town.  
Need a building, a stadium? Done!

> If I put a gun to your head  
> I can take what you own.  
> If I want power,  
> I take power. Done!

Not give-and-take, take and give.  
We are benevolent,  
dictating contributions to the ballet,  
good public relations.  
Not food banks, son.  
Poor write-offs just don’t make good press.
Damn the press and Ted Koppel.
I rob from the rich and give
to poor little ol’ me.
I even got me a crew,
everybody needs a Board of Trustees.
Nobody can fight the world alone.
You might not respect us even in numbers,
so we carry bullets and chrome.

Together, one for all and all for us.
Power!
We own this town.
Everybody’s on our turf.
I can’t afford to be soft-hearted,
it’s kill or be killed, no POWs
coming out of this war.
And the money?
It’s just a way of keeping score.

Money ain’t nothin’ to a dead man,
you better check the body count.
We didn’t ask for war,
you gave it to us.
So either poop or get off the pot.
I have to be true to the game,
compassion in battle will get a brother shot.

Come on over here and meet the homeboys—
best part, we hardly ever go home.
Hey you, use the back steps.
You look good in the bedroom,
but not in the boardroom,
this way to the ladies’ waiting room, miss.

And all you witches can wait
until hell freezes over.
’Cause if your baby dies,
if you die,
if a cop dies
and I don’t die?
Everything is fine.
When all competition is gone
the game will be over.
and the world will be mine.
In guns we trust.

Our motto is: in tradition we trust.
And speaking of trust,
son, put down that gun.
That’s no way to rob a bank.

- Discuss the poem. Who do these two voices belong to? What do they have in common? What’s different about them?
- Ask the student pairs to go back to their lists, to put the paper they divided back together. Ask them to compare and contrast the lists, to see what is the same and what is different given their two different points of view. Maybe they can think of some other points as they look over partners’ lists.
- Ask the kids to put their poems together then (either blocks of copy or single lines traded back and forth) to create a poem for two voices.
- Have the teams take turns presenting the poems for two voices to the rest of the class. (Bring in a soapbox or dairy crate for kids to stand on to recreate an American tradition.)
- Assess students’ ability to compromise, establish a clear point of view, and present their poems aloud. This is a democratic forum: Did they participate, treat everyone with respect, learn new things?

Here are two poems written by the Gompers students:

It’s not fair, my boy could die.
I need your son to go to war.
I don’t know when he’s going to be safe.
But he has to go for his country.
He may never come home to me again.
But he will die with honor.
Honor or no honor: I don’t want him to go.
He will have to go anyway.
Think twice before sending people to die with “honor.”
—Letycya and Curina, Grade 8
Everyone should have equal rights.
Stand up and fight for what you like.
Women are not being treated like men, only the Lord can comprehend.

Women should be treated fairly men are rarely comprehending that women are really smart.
They put their babies into Head Start.

—T.T. and Natasha, Grade 8

One difference I noticed working with Katie Lufkin’s sixth-grade social studies class is that, at the ripe old age of eleven or twelve, the students seemed to have a much more narrow view of the world than the eighth graders at Gompers. The students were much more focused on family and home life and less tuned into world events. Establishing points of view other than their own was a challenge for Katie’s sixth graders. When we finished the exercise, Katie turned to me and said she was going to have to reinforce two writing skills with her students: point of view and how to build an argument using specific facts. She was afraid I would be disappointed with the results of the students’ writing, but I found it exciting that our poetry lesson was able to help her in this assessment of her class and students’ capabilities: We were working in January, with proficiency tests looming in March.

If your students aren’t skilled enough to write poems independently, you can create a poem together as a class. At Gompers, kids in a 7.5 class (kids repeating seventh grade, mostly because of difficulties reading and understanding English as a second language) created the following piece:
IT'S NOT FAIR
That there is war
IT'S NOT FAIR
Gangs on the street
IT'S NOT FAIR
My brother gets what he wants
IT'S NOT FAIR
That drive-bys kill
IT'S NOT FAIR
The innocent die
IT'S NOT FAIR
That we're mistreated
IT'S NOT FAIR
I'm in 7.5
IT'S NOT FAIR
I didn't pass to eighth
IT'S NOT FAIR
That people fight
IT'S NOT FAIR
Sixteen to drive
IT'S NOT FAIR
People mistreated 'cuz of their color
IT'S NOT FAIR
The homeless have no homes
IT'S NOT FAIR
Police give tickets for throwing trash
IT'S NOT FAIR
People tag our school
IT'S NOT FAIR
IT'S NOT FAIR
Stop the violence
Stop the violence
IT'S NOT FAIR!

Such an exercise is portable. Imagine moving it to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. To the gold rush. To the dust bowl. Take it with you in your classroom time travels.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


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