Keeping Score: Creating Musical Scores for Poems
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CCSS.ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.1, 9-10.4, 9-10.10, 11-12.1, 11-12.4, 11-12.7, 11-12.10

NCTE Standards: 1-6; 11-12.

(Two Days)

Overview

In this lesson, students practice close readings of poems by analyzing the style—what musicians call the "dynamics" —of the poem: its volume, speed, language, syntax, lineation, and punctuation. Students will also consider the concept of connotation here, or the subtext of language. Here students can compare individual choices to the same poem as a class, work in small groups for practice and reinforcement, and ultimately perform a poem individually that enacts the choices they've made as careful analysts.

From Theory to Practice

This exercise is rooted in performance—and fun is the name of the game here—but these performance games are also hugely beneficial toward developing close reading skills. According to Jeff Wilhelm, dramatic play helps students go beyond mere comprehension by helping students "evoke the text and elaborate upon it as a 'story participant.'" (121).

For a more complete discussion of "scoring" poems, see chapters seven through nine of *Wordplaygrounds*. The key here is to keep the instructions and the notations simple. I usually ask students for three punches (giving certain words emphasis), three pauses (creating space between words), and three paintings (reading suggestively to bring out the connotations) of words in a poem.

Resources

Worksheet #1: Punching words for emphasis

Worksheet #2: Punctuation Devices

Worksheet #3: Painting: Colorful language

Poems

"Map of the Stars" by Adrian Matejka

Further Reading

O'Brien, Peggy, ed. (2006). *Shakespeare Set Free.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

O'Connor, John S. (2004). *Wordplaygrounds*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE Press.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey (2008). *You Gotta Be the Book*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Make inferences about the central ideas and themes of poems.

- Choose key details and significant words and phrases to elicit the meaning of poems.

- Practice close reading by considering the connotation of individual words within poems.

- Think about the role of punctuation in the pacing and the meaning of poems.

Session One

1. Announce that we will learn a quick system of notation to "score" the music of poems we read: punching (giving certain words emphasis), pausing (creating space between words), and painting (reading suggestively to bring out the connotations) of words in a poem. These exercises are adapted from *Wordplaygrounds*.

2. Write this sentence on the board: "I really thought I knew her." Underline a different word each time, having students take turns emphasizing a new word and explaining the connotative difference that results from the stress. This becomes part of our performance shorthand: underlined words announce words to be delivered with greater emphasis. (*Shakespeare Set Free*, p. 213).

3. Pass out the "List of Punctuation Devices" and tell students to keep the sheet handy as we start scoring poems. Mention that punctuation marks guide the pace at which we read, but readers might also pause where there are no marks in order to emphasize the word that follows a pause. (Imagine pausing before the word 'socks' in this

sentence: "Thanks so much for the neat socks." There is no punctuation mark there, but a pause might indicate the lack of excitement in receiving a present of socks.)

4. Write the words 'denotation' and 'connotation' on the board. Ask if students know what they mean. (Many students who know some Spanish have noted that the prefix helps define the words, such as *de-* meaning 'of' and *con-* meaning 'with'). Denotation is the literal or primary meaning *of* a word, in contrast to connotation, which is the feelings or ideas suggested *with* a word.

5. Write this sentence on the board: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep." Ask students, which words are most suggestive, most connotatively rich? Circle them. These are the words we want to *paint* (i.e. read), so that listeners will hear the shadings, the suggestiveness of the circled words.

6. Now that we have a system of notation, pass out a copy of "Map of the Stars" by Adrian Matejka.

7. Ask for a volunteer to read the poem all the way through.

8. Tell students they should mark the poem as they read it, underlining words that deserve to be *punched*, drawing vertical lines before places where *pauses* might be added (it is not necessary to mark commas and dashes—unless you feel an extra pause should be added there); circling words that are especially interesting, language that speakers can *paint* the words with their voice.

9. Try out suggestions from the class: one student reads his or her score of the first line and a new reader tries to follow those vocal directions. Repeat this pattern with the remaining lines so that everyone gets a chance to direct the performance of a line or to perform one.

10. Having scored readings of a poem together as a class, let students find a poem of their own to score and perform for the class the next day.

Worksheet # 1: Punching Words for Emphasis

        I really thought I knew her.

A. <u>I</u> really thought I knew her.

(implies that I, for one; as opposed to, or unlike, anyone else)

B. I <u>really</u> thought I knew her.

(implies that the knowledge was genuine and thorough, not insignificant)

C. I really <u>thought</u> I knew her.

(emphasizes the past tense; s/he *once* thought he knew her)

D. I really thought <u>I</u> knew her.

(similar to first choice; a little more personal perhaps; the speaker feels betrayed)

E. I really thought I <u>knew</u> her.

(not just a passing knowledge)

F. I really thought I knew <u>her</u>.

(The speaker knew her better than other people, or as opposed to anyone else)

Punctuation Devices:

Commas indicate brief pauses.

Pairs of commas indicate modifying and appositional material.

Dashes indicate longer pauses that tend to throw the action forward.

Colons indicate a movement from general to specific, and suggest a longer pause still.

Semi-colons separate independent clauses (dividing balanced items of equal weight) and separate complicated items within a list.

Periods indicate the end of sentences and require long, full stops.

Exclamation points suggest the words are to be read louder and with greater emphasis.

Question marks indicate the speaker's voice should rise at the end of the sentence.

Worksheet #3: Painting: Colorful Language

Here are some sample sentences students might practice with before performing their own poems. Students should circle the most colorful (i.e. the most interesting) words in each line. Then students might practice saying these circled words in a manner that best brings out the meaning of the word. Try saying "fiery hot" in the first line in a way that brings out the spicy diction. Try saying "soft and warm" in the second line in as soothing and tranquil a way as you can.

1. Sweet Baby Ray's fiery hot sauce will set your meal ablaze.

2. The sand was soft and warm, and the surf rolled in gently.

3. She spilled a huge gallon-sized jug of Kool-aid right on my new suede jacket. I felt sticky and gross all day long.

4. That sweet little old lady from down the street came over with a plate of sugar cookies that were still warm.

5. My boss is so cuckoo he spits when he talks and screams like an ape even if you're just five or ten minutes late.

6. The mountain we call, in whispers, *Catalina*.

7. My face is soft, opal, a feathering of snow against the cold black leather coat which is night.

8. We lie down screaming as rain punches through.

9. Spray-painted offerings on walls offer a chaos of colors.

10. This concrete river becomes a steaming, bubbling snake of water, pouring over nightmares of wakefulness, pouring out a rush of birds, a flow of clear liquid on a cloudless day.

(Note: The last five entries are lines taken randomly from poems by Diane Wakoski, Rita Dove, and Luis Rodriguez).

Common Core State Standards

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.1, 11-12.1: Cite Strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.10: By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.7: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

NCTE Standards:

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).