

Michael Robinson, Gluck Fellow in Theatre

Chicken Poetry, or How Everyday Things Make Amazing Poems

Target Audience: Grades 3-8

Time: Approximately 1 hour, quantity and length of activities adjusted as needed

Objectives

- 1) To introduce “hatching” poets (who may not yet know they are poets) to basic elements of poetry, strategies of making words “poetic,” such as the use of rhyme and repetition. Some poetic terms, such as metaphor and form will also be introduced. Emphasis will be on hands-on application of making the most ordinary of things—such as chickens!—into poems. Poetic elements, strategies and terms to be explored would be determined based on grade and in collaboration with the classroom teacher. Students (Grades 3-4) would be introduced to descriptive elements such as simple simile as well as be exposed to the idea of ekphrasis—poems from art—utilizing the chicken art of Doug Argue and pop culture icons, Foghorn Leghorn and Chicken Little. Grades 4-6 would explore more complex elements such as metaphor while middle school students would be more formally introduced to ekphrastic poems as a strategy.
- 2) To help budding poets see the poetic in the mundane and ordinary and learn to hatch poems about these ordinary, mundane things.

Materials

- Black or white board and markers
- Blank paper, pens/pencils. A set of colored pencils/crayons for each group of 5-6 in Grades 2-3.
- Large close-up color pictures of real and artistic chickens
- Copies of poems: An original poem, “A Chicken Is More Than What Comes Out of a Bucket,” and one age-appropriate poem, such as Jack Prelutsky’s “Last Night I Dreamed of Chickens” (for younger) or Eliza Griswold’s “Chicken Little in Love” (for older).

Lesson

1) Have the class break up into small groups (have teacher do this prior to my arrival?) to facilitate later activities.

2) Warm Up: Tell everyone that for the next hour or so they are not going to be 3rd, 4th and so on grade students but students of poetry. In fact, they are going to be poets! What does that mean? It means we get to play with words the way a basketball player plays with a basketball or an artist might play with clay. And what do basketball players and clay artists do first? They warm up! So we poets need to warm up. First let's warm up our listening. I'm going to read a chicken poem that I wrote. [READ POEM]. What did you think? Thumbs up? Thumbs down? I think it could use some work. Writing Tip # 1. Everything you write can usually be improved by a rewrite. Who knows what I mean by rewrite? [TAKE ANSWERS]. Well, today, as poets, you get to help me rewrite my chicken poem. But now we are going to warm up our eyes and imaginations. I want to share some pictures of real chickens and chickens that came out of the mind of artists. [SHOW PICTURES/DISCUSS] Some of these pictures are a little weird. Some are funny. Some are famous cartoon chickens. And some are huge paintings. Now your ears are warmed up, your eyes and imagination are warmed up...what am I missing? Ah! Our fingers, hands and wrist because like the artist that works with clay we need to use them. Now we are warmed up! (5-10 min)

3) Pass pictures out, one for each group, for students to look at more closely and discuss. Have them think of a word or two that comes to them as they look at the picture. I will solicit words from each group and right them on the board. (5 min)

4) Pass out chicken poem Handout 1 to each group. It is missing a few words. Let them come up with words to fill in the blanks. They can use the words on the board or come up with others. At the end of this activity, the groups can share their changes. Discuss simile (one of the blanks will create a simile) and parts of a poem—lines, stanzas, and so on. (5 min)

5) Read, or have a student volunteer to read, Prelutsky's "Last Night I Dreamed of Chickens" (younger grades) or Dihn's "Eating Fried Chicken" (Middle school age). Discuss the poem. How does it make you feel? What do you like about it? For "Last Night..."

discuss the poetic strategy of repetition of words, end rhymes, use of humor. For “Eating...” discuss alliteration and metaphor and tone. (5 min)

6) Reread the poem. Younger students can act out the verbs of the first stanza of the “Last Night...” poem. Sit them down and have them come up with alternative verbs. Read the second stanza and have them come up with alternative nouns. For older students using “Eating,” ask them to come up with a favorite line in the poem and swap out “eating fried chicken” with another favorite comfort food when they are stressed. Have them recite a few lines of their alternative (such as “Eating Mac & Cheese”) (5-10 min)

7) Break the class into groups and using the chicken pictures, the words on the board and the example of the two poems, create a poem based on the picture. Each group should keep their picture a secret. Go around the room and jumpstart where needed. (10-15 min)

8) Gather up the pictures and shuffle them. Line them in front of the class. Let each student group present their poem then have the rest of the groups vote on which picture the poem goes with. Place the poem over the “winning” picture. Continue until all the pictures are covered. Then reveal whether the voting was correct. (10-15 min)

9) If time permits, have young students illustrate their poems. Have the older students start a “Eating Fried Chicken”-esque poem.

Last Night I Dreamed of Chickens
by Jack Prelutsky

Last night I dreamed of chickens,
there were chickens everywhere,
they were standing on my stomach,
they were nesting in my hair,
they were pecking at my pillow,
they were hopping on my head,
they were ruffling up their feathers
as they raced about my bed.

They were on the chairs and tables,
they were on the chandeliers,
they were roosting in the corners,
they were clucking in my ears,
there were chickens, chickens,
chickens
for as far as I could see...
when I woke today, I noticed
there were eggs on top of me.

From *Something BIG Has Been Here*, published by
Greenwillow, 1990.

Eating Fried Chicken
by Linh Dinh

I hate to admit this, brother, but there are times
When I'm eating fried chicken
When I think about nothing else but eating fried chicken,
When I utterly forget about my family, honor and country,
The various blood debts you owe me,
My past humiliations and my future crimes—
Everything, in short, but the crispy skin on my fried
chicken.

But I'm not altogether evil, there are also times
When I will refuse to lick or swallow anything
That's not generally available to mankind.

(Which is, when you think about it, absolutely nothing at
all.)

And no doubt that's why apples can cause riots,
And meat brings humiliation,
And each gasp of air
Will fill one's lungs with gun powder and smoke.

Linh Dinh, "Eating Fried Chicken" from *American Tatts*,
published by Chax Press.
(Chax Press, 2005)

A CHICKEN IS MORE THAN WHAT COMES OUT OF A BUCKET

A chicken is more than what comes out of a bucket,
you know. They are older than we are,
they ran with dinosaurs. Ran
round dinosaur eggs as big as them.

They speak cockadoodle—
over thirty different clucks and crows.
Mothers talk to their chicks before they hatch
And before they hatch, they talk back.

Outdoors, roosters can see the colors of dawn
we cannot see: violet and ultraviolet,
an hour before we see the sun's orange light the horizon.

They love to play in dust and dirt.
They play teacher to their chicks and
recognize the faces of their owners.

A chicken is more than what comes out of a bucket.
They are weeders in gardens and eaters
of crop-eating pests. They fertilize fields and
wake us up in time to breakfast before the start of day
A chicken is more than what comes out of a bucket
Fried or baked or steam-cooked
They are partners and friends,
commodities and pets.

They are with us everyday, seen or unseen.
And everyday, like us, they are miracles.

- Michael Robinson, 2017