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They tell me to be the day
with shadows easily seen.


I tell them I am each hour,
Writing Poetry with
Middle School Students.



Kindle the Fire

They will stock me with ideas,
so their catch is guaranteed.

I tell them I am the ocean,
SHELLEY TUCKER, P.H.D.

tumble-tossed in sandy hands,

spilling in all directions.

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Thank you so much to the following teachers for their excellent support of this work: Mary Edwards, Joel Gillman, Jill Meyers, Greg Jones, Tamara Bunnell, Dana Absgarten, Peter Sarurda, Francis Finan, Lori Eickelberg, Michael Danielson, Sara Yamaski, Kay Greenberg, and the teachers, staff, and parents at McGilvra, a Seattle Public School.

I am indebted to the work of Naomi Shihab Nye, William Stafford, Mary Oliver, and Billy Collins, who write poems that are at once profound and accessible; to Kenneth Koch, Donald Graves, Natalie Goldberg, Anne Lamott, Tim Hulley, George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson for their teachings about writing and thinking.

My special thanks to the Seattle Arts Commission for its award of an Arts in Education grant, supporting the development of this work.

Thank you Kelly Koechel, age 16, for creating the name of this book, *Kindle the Fire*.

My deepest appreciation to my friends and family in poetry: Lauren Wilson, Claudia Mauro, Caitlin Wilson, John Poole, Rosalie Gammelgaard, and Nancy Talley; to Patrick Crowley, for our celebrations of words and voice; to my granddaughter, Jackie, a living poem; and to my wonderful husband, Bruce Sherman, who loves like the finest poem of all.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Chickie Kitchman, for her unwavering belief in the artistry of children.

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Art & Design: M. Jane Heelan, Liz Nemeth

Editorial: Cindy Kane

Manufacturing: Mark Cirillo, Thomas Dunne

Production: Karen Edmonds, Jennifer Murphy

Publishing Operations: Carolyn Coyle

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ISBN 978-0-673-61732-3

ISBN-eBook 978-1-59647-131-3

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ML 06 05 04 03 02 01

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I n t r o d u c t i o n



POETRY WRITING IS AN INVITATION. It encourages students to think and write creatively, use poetic language in speech and prose, see new connections between the things around them, appreciate beauty, pay attention, and listen attentively. Poetry writing gives students a way to describe nature, express humor, examine relationships, review the past, frame a moment, write about the future, and ask and answer questions. It is an ideal part of the language arts curriculum because it is both a creative art form and an academic discipline.

This book offers a map for writing **free verse poetry** (poems without end rhyme or set structures) that is relevant, interesting, and exciting. Every student, regardless of academic accomplishment, can excel in writing free verse poetry because it is based on everyday thoughts, experiences, feelings, and language. Topics are offered on the reproducible handouts in this book, but students may use nearly any subject in their poems. In general, the easier handouts in a section appear at the beginnings of chapters. Lines are provided on the handouts for students' poems, but in many cases, writers will need extra paper to fully develop their ideas.

The poetry writing exercises in *Kindle the Fire* encourage students to discover similarities between unlike things, use parts of speech in new ways, and develop their ideas through sound and imagery. The exercises will teach and challenge middle school students, and they are also a valuable resource for older elementary school children, high school students, and beginning adult writers. All of the student poetry was written in my classes. Many of the poems are by middle school students; however, the poets range in age from eight through adult. These poems show that free verse poetry gives writers a wide variety of choices. This includes the optional use of titles.

E d i t i n g f o r c o n t e n t

Writers carefully **edit** the words in their poems to make meanings precise and sounds effective. When editing, they can pay particular attention to specific words

and lines that feel wrong to them. Instead of reworking an entire poem, they might start with these areas. Their goal then is to maintain the original flow of their writing while finding accurate words to convey exactly what they mean.

The intentional repetition of words in a poem shows that sound is an integral part of meaning. Poets consider the repetition of all words, even small ones, such as *the* and *a*. Ask your students to read their poems aloud to themselves and others to hear whether repeated words support the sounds, rhythms, and meanings of their poems.

Inflectional endings, such as *ing*, *er*, and *ed*, added to root verbs (e.g., *call* and *open*) influence the sound and movement of poetry. As students edit their poems, they might consider verb forms with and without inflectional endings. Just varying the verb *walk*, for example, changes the sound and impact of these sentences: *I am walking in the snow. I walk in the snow.*

Students might also consider the number of syllables in the last word of each **stanza** (group of lines separated by a space). Single syllable words (e.g., *rock* and *talk*) and compound words in which each syllable is strongly stressed (e.g., *school-house* and *backyard*) provide strong endings. Multisyllabic words (e.g., *investigate* and *laughter*) that do not end with a stressed syllable offer softer endings. Some poets end at least half of their stanzas with single syllable or compound words for emphasis and closure.

The first definition of a poem found in a dictionary usually states that it is a piece of writing expressing a strong feeling or sentiment. Poets might use this property as an ally when editing their writing by asking: Does the poem feel right? Am I conveying exactly what I want to say? Are my descriptions precise? Are my ideas original and not overused in other people's writing?

E d i t i n g f o r f o r m a t a n d c o n v e n t i o n s

The line breaks, capitalization, punctuation, and format in free verse poetry are determined by the writer. Until recently, nearly all poets **capitalized** the first letters of lines and proper nouns. Most poets today, however, capitalize only the first letter in a sentence (rather than a line) and the beginning letter in proper nouns, as in

prose writing. I have students **punctuate poems** in this way when I teach poetry in schools. This makes their poems more readable while simultaneously reinforcing the writing conventions of prose.

Line breaks (where the lines in a poem end) provide pauses, stops, and emphases, serving as effective and important means of punctuation and stress in free verse poetry. An easy way for students to end a line is to stop it where they pause to breathe. Many poets always put the article (e.g., *a*, *the*) on the same line as the noun it is modifying (e.g., *the moon*, *a basketball*). Writers generally place the preposition and its object (e.g., *by the bridge* and *on the table*) on the same line. Try this exercise with your students. First, select a poem. Then ask your students to rewrite it a few times, changing where the lines end without altering the words. They'll see that the placement of words on a line can dramatically change the meaning of poetry.

The format or layout of a poem serves as its container. Similar to a picture frame around a photograph, the format can completely alter the sense of the poem. Most writers today present their poetry flush left. Other presentations need to support the meaning of the poem.

P u b l i s h i n g

Students can publish poetry books with staples, comb bindings, stitches, spiral bindings, or glue. No matter what form students' books take, it is important for them to publish their writing. During the publishing process, students hone the craft of poetry, considering, revising, and correcting the words, spelling, format, and punctuation. Books are validation of their work, allowing them to appreciate their poetry while sharing their creativity with others.

R e a d i n g s

Ask your students to read their poems aloud. Student poetry speaks to wide audiences because of the relevance of its topics, use of figurative language and sound, relatively short length, sentiments expressed, and opportunity for authentic expression. Poetry writing, listening, and sharing build community and caring in the classroom.

Metaphor



The comparison of two unlike nouns

A METAPHOR is the comparison of two nouns with different meanings. *Music is chocolate*, *love was a paper clip*, and *the vocabulary of a river* are examples of metaphors. The nouns in metaphors evoke our senses, providing immediate and tangible experience. Read the word *chocolate*, for example, and you can almost see, taste, feel, smell, and touch it. In the metaphor *music is chocolate*, music takes on the tantalizing attributes of chocolate—rich, thick, filling, and leaving you wanting more.

The power of metaphors does not derive from the use of large or obscure nouns. Instead, students start with everyday nouns, such as *tree*, *pencil*, *night*, and *peach*. Then they make unique comparisons, as in *a tree is an octopus* or *a pencil is a river*. The impact of metaphors comes from the two nouns poets choose to compare and how they expand these ideas in their writing.

Nouns in metaphors do something adjectives can't. They serve as compasses, showing poets how to direct their writing. In the sentences *music is interesting*, *our vacation was fun*, and *my anger was bad*, the adjectives *interesting*, *fun*, and *bad* do not summon our senses or provide concrete information. Change the adjectives to nouns, however, and many paths for poems emerge. In the metaphors *our vacation was a roller coaster* and *my anger was a pomegranate*, the characteristics of the nouns *roller coaster* and *pomegranate* provide writers with specific ideas for poetry. A student could easily extend these metaphors and write, for example, *our vacation was a roller coaster, slow to start but quickly offering a panorama of sights* and *my anger was a lemon with a thick skin and sour taste*.

Metaphors ignite writing with original ideas. Initially, though, some poets lose the power of metaphors in two ways. First, instead of comparing two nouns that are

different, they connect similar nouns, as in *music is sound* and *tears are feelings*, composing definitions rather than metaphors. Second, some poets write metaphors they've already heard, such as *time is money* and *heart of gold*. Because overused comparisons offer nothing new, writers rarely develop these metaphors in their poems.

Students can easily avoid these problems by writing original comparisons and using two nouns with different meanings in their metaphors. To illustrate these points, you might try this exercise with your class. Write the words *music is* on the left side of the board or transparency. In the middle of the board, write the following categories: *animals, fruit, vegetables, seasons, holidays, weather, sports, transportation, feelings, things in the sky, and objects in the ocean*. On the right side of the board write, *Where? When? Why? How? Doing what?* Tell your students that they are going to compare music to nouns with different meanings. At first this might seem a little unusual, but they will quickly see that the comparison of any two nouns can always be explained. Review with them how the composition of new metaphors differs from definitions and overused comparisons.

Then start at the top of the category list and ask your students to compare music to animals, as in *music is a snake* and *music is a cat*. Next, have them make their sentences longer by answering one of the questions on the right side of the board to create, for example, *music is a snake, coiling around my mind* and *music is a cat with changing moods*. (You might suggest that they lengthen their sentences without the word *because*, which sounds better in prose than poetry.) Then ask them to make comparisons between music and types of fruit, as in *music is a watermelon with the juice of inspiration* and *music is blueberries that I eat in handfuls*. Have your students continue to explore connections between music and words from many different categories.

Students will have fun writing metaphors and will discover that the possibilities for original comparisons are exciting and endless. Metaphors offer poets a terrain of new ideas while helping them map the direction of their poetry.

Imagine Time Is a Tomato

On the lines below, write **unusual** comparisons by adding the names of animals, bodies of water, feelings, seasons, transportation, months, musical instruments, or other places and things. Then complete your sentences.

EXAMPLES: Imagine this pen is a river, ink of ideas flowing over rocky words.
Imagine time is a ripe apple, rolling quickly down a hill.

You may change any of the nouns printed on the lines.

Imagine a storm is _____

Imagine the wind is _____

Imagine thunder is _____

Imagine lightning is _____

Imagine rain is _____

Imagine stars are _____

Imagine the sun is _____

Imagine the sky is _____



On another sheet of paper, write one of your *imagine* sentences, and compose a poem about it. You may also use a number of related *imagine* sentences in the same poem.