

POETRY PATTERNS

The how-to-write-a-poem program

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This teaching guide is dedicated to the memory of Barbara Lusby Hise, an extraordinary teacher.

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INTRODUCTION

GUIDELINES FOR TAB 3: PATTERNS



Remember: This program is designed for you to adapt to your specific students!

- Most of the patterns have two or more poetry samples written as handouts with simplified instructions. Some are more appropriate for certain grade levels as suggested, but use as many or as few as you wish. *Very Short Patterns*, the last subsection of this Tab 3, is designed for primary age children. All the others are designed for at least fourth grade and higher, though some need to be modified.
- With each pattern, read both the Teacher Guide portion and the student handouts, for the patterns sometimes are detailed only in the student handouts. (**Remember:** All handout pages have the large *H* at the top of the page.)
- If your class has had experience writing poetry or picks up the idea of the patterns easily and successfully, move on to **Tab 5: Structures** at any time. PATTERNS is a flexible program that is designed for you to adapt to your specific needs and situation.
- The Teacher Guide portion of each pattern is designed to give you information that I normally share with my students to interest them in the pattern. For teachers, I have added information designed to explain why the pattern works and the techniques I've found that seem to help make the pattern approach successful.
- With some of the patterns, I have added an essay from **Tab 4: Observations**. These observations represent information that I have used with my students that help this program work. You will want to read them before getting to those patterns. All the **Observations** are designed to be handouts for your students.

Here is my suggested list for using **Observations**:

- *The Problem with Rhyme*, page 4:12—use with *Wonderings*
- *The Way I Write a Poem*, page 4:13—use with *Hidden Perceptions*
- *What Does a Poem Look Like?*, page 4:16—use with *Poems About Objects*
- *The Poetic "I" Meets The Poetic "Eye,"* page 4:19—use with *Poems Expressing Moods and Feelings*
- *Public Writing: Private Writing*, page 4:22—use with *Obsessed!*
- *The Way I Rewrite a Poem*, page 4:26—use with *Poems About People in Your Past*
- *Are You Ready for Rhyme?*, page 4:29—use with *Annoyances*
- *Meter*, page 4:31—use with *Annoyances*

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 1



Important:

This symbol appears on every page in *PATTERNS* that is a potential handout.

*Also note that pages to be duplicated as handouts are typed in capital letters.

Student handouts to be prepared for this pattern:

*ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM—VERSION A, page 3:7

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM—VERSION B, page 3:9

WE ARE ALL POETS, page 3:10

How do you begin a poem? The best way for a beginner is to simply start putting words on paper, not worrying about what the meaning is going to be. One easy way is to begin with one of the most popular and enduring elements of poetry—comparisons. Comparisons are an important part of the *Anyone Can Write A Poem* formula, which goes like this:

C + C + WD + E = NP (Version A)

What does it mean? The translation is: *Comparison plus comparison, plus wild dream plus emotion equals nonsense poetry*. How does it work? Easy. The intent of *Anyone Can Write a Poem* is to plunge students into poetry writing—before they know what is happening to them. At the completion of this section, which includes Version B, each student should have written a poem that is personally satisfying.

At this beginning point, you should make no extensive analysis of poetry, no defense of why they are forbidden to write in rhyme, and no explanations of what a poem is or might look like. We want to get them *writing*. We'll worry about explanations later. Since this approach is mostly to silence the "poetry protesters"—the ones who claim they never have and never will write a poem—you should modify these comments when working with an advanced class or other group that already has a positive attitude toward writing poetry. In fact, with advanced classes I have sometimes completely skipped Version A.

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM FORMULA (Version A)

This "formula" results in a nonsense poem. Now take a look at the student handout for Version A. The nonsense poem is designed for beginners or those whose only idea of poetry is something written by Keats or Wordsworth. It is a no-fail assignment that will result in every student, regardless of ability or level, writing a poem

Here is how I suggest you approach this first important assignment.

1. Save the WE ARE ALL POETS handout until both Version A and Version B are written and discussed in class. By that time virtually all your students will have written at least one successful poem and may be more interested in the writer of the formula.

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 2

“

*Any
wild
dream
will
work.*

”

2. Do plunge directly in to poetry writing. Place the “formula” on the chalkboard. How big a production you make of it depends upon your students’ level of sophistication. They should have the student guideline page for Version A in front of them. (Since this is the very first poem, I have more author comments on these guidelines than on most.)
3. Talk them through it, step by step, asking them not to move ahead of you. Give them time to write the responses. After appropriate periods of time, tell the class that anyone who can’t think of a comparison, for example, should write down the first comparison that comes into his head. Refer them to the sample sheet in front of them. Any comparison will work. The same can be said for the wild dream. *Any wild dream will work.*
4. Even with my sample in front of them, you may want to write along with them or have your own sample prepared to read to them step by step. At this early time in the school year—I usually do this poem the second day of school—it is vital to permit no blank papers. Insist that each portion of the notes for the poem—the comparisons, the wild dream, and so on—be completed. If some stray students have a blank paper, tell them they must copy your responses. Usually they will think of something fast before copying yours, but at this point it makes no difference. *What counts is that every student must have words on paper.*
5. Follow the instructions for writing *exactly*, but, I repeat, don’t argue with them about it. Tell them it will all become clear later. Do not argue about what a poem should look like. You do not want to get led astray by the students who work to control class time by asking useless questions so that they will not have to complete the assignment.
6. Read your completed poem, if you have one, and/or the sample poem on their handout. Then give them time to write their poem.
7. What should happen is that by the end of the class period, you will have a group of words written by each student that should turn out to be a fine series of nonsense poems.
8. Now comes the hard part. *At this point every poem must be typed and copied—without the writer’s name.* I have never learned how to do this vital step another way that works as effectively. Don’t change their poems, even if the writing looks more like a paragraph than a poem. I sometimes correct spelling as I am retyping, out of habit. When that task is done, you are ready for the second poetry lesson.

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 3



From the beginning, model how to look for good phrases and appropriate comparisons.

9. Distribute the poems to the class and ask them to look for good lines they like the sound of, whether or not the lines make sense to them. Almost without fail, nearly every student in the class will have some phrase or line pointed out in his poem that someone liked.
10. Accept no criticism of the poems. Since these are nonsense poems, very little criticism should result anyway. This is time to look for strong sounding phrases. If by chance some students have written a poem that makes sense, that's okay, too. I tell them they are already to the next step. Usually, in a class working mostly at grade level, about four or five students will create a poem that makes sense. In addition, some students write what is nonsense to them, but we think there is sense in it.
11. In this session I also try to model the method of saying good things about lines worthy of good comments. There is one weakness I would mention. If a student has thoroughly mixed up the grammar, writing a line such as "Boy the went is door," I point out that this is not a nonsense poem, but a miscellaneous word list which was not the point of the assignment. (This situation happens occasionally, but it has never been a major problem.)
12. What do the students learn from this? They learn, through simple non-threatening word play, to begin accepting a pattern approach to poetry writing.
13. What do you learn from it? You learn from their skillful use of comparisons or from the words they use, which students already have had some experience in poetry writing. You also give each student immediate success with writing in your class, because no one can do the assignment wrong. (However, note the exception above: the "word list" approach to a nonsense poem.)
14. If a student is so lacking in listening skills that he dared to use rhyme, *I praise the poem if in my opinion it is good rhyme and a successful nonsense poem.* But I remind her that we are not supposed to rhyme until much later and that I will not accept another poem in rhyme until then. *This is not an arbitrary rule. Too many students will use rhyme to avoid writing genuine poetry.* They will cling to light verse, simple parodies of "Mary had a little lamb" and other superficial writing. They will use rhyme to avoid honest writing which we must get from them if we are going to help them grow as writers. For further explanation read *The Problem with Rhyme* found in the **Tab 4: Observations**, page 4:12.

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 4

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM FORMULA (Version B)



“
... a real
poem
about a
real
person ...

”

1. The steps are exactly the same as Version A except you must remind the class at the beginning, “This time we are writing a poem that makes sense. We are going to write a real poem about a real person.” Review the poetry formula, emphasizing that vital difference.
2. As you work through the formula, again by the numbered steps, if any student feels she cannot think of appropriate comparisons, toss out a silly one or an inappropriate one. Students usually won’t use them, and if they do, the pattern will still work so it doesn’t really make any difference. I also urge them to take the first comparison that comes to their mind; it is frequently the most appropriate.
3. Once again, I read my completed poem before they start to write their poem, but only after they have written their notes.
4. A week has probably passed since I have typed the previous poems—unless I had a great student assistant who got the poems typed up in one day—and discussed them with the class. So by now, perhaps the students know me and each other well enough that some might volunteer to read aloud their poems to the class. This would be ideal. However, it doesn’t usually work that way for me. Consequently, for the last time, I collect and type all the poems, run them off with no names, and distribute them for discussion.
5. The discussion is most important. These are your first real poems. You are building an attitude that will carry over to all the other poetry assignments.
6. I praise as many poems, or parts of poems, as I can during the discussion time. I also ask students to point out parts of poems they especially like—comparisons, phrases, or lines—providing they give a reason, not just “I liked this poem.” Rather, I encourage them to clarify: “I liked this poem about the four year old because the writer showed the curiosity of children and how everything for them is like an explorer’s journey in a strange country.”
7. You and the class will be delighted to discover that most students have written a series of words that can respectfully be called a poem. Some will still want to start an argument that none of it is poetry because it doesn’t rhyme. You may wait until later as scheduled or refer them now to *The Problem with Rhyme*, page 4:12.

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 5

8. If you feel the class has generally been successful with this technique, go on to the next pattern. If not, repeat the person poem, having the students select another person to write about.



“

Example:
simplicity
in connection
with
Thoreau.

”

Other ways to use this pattern

1. If you are teaching concepts in relationship to literature or ideas in any course, you could get the students to express themselves by assigning the word you are discussing. *Example:* simplicity in connection with Thoreau.
2. Have them go through the “formula.” Compare simplicity to something else. Compare simplicity to an animal. If simplicity were a person and could dream, what would be simplicity’s dream. What emotion does simplicity have and why?
3. All this information will encourage the students to think about what you have been discussing in class and should result in some interesting poems. You can see that this is virtually an endless idea.

When you are ready for your next poetry experience with your class, move on to the *Wonderings* pattern.

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 6



ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM—VERSION A

Student guidelines and sample poem

1. You are going to be writing notes you will use in a few minutes to create a poem. Because this first poem is going to be mostly for fun, don't worry about a subject right now.
2. Start with a comparison and plunge right in without worrying where it might lead. Why not begin comparing a living thing—plant, animal, or human—to something nonliving, inanimate? An example would be: *My roses burst like fireworks in July.* Or another: *My dog is a garbage pit for table scraps. His mouth opens like a hinged lid for left-over steak.*
3. Now, select a person, plant, or animal and compare it with something nonliving. Write your comparison.
4. For your second comparison use two things that are totally different to create a sort of wild, crazy comparison. An example would be: *My automobile is a rosy sunset in a desert land.* Or another: *My brother is a table lamp.* Write your comparison.
5. Add a wild dream. A wild dream doesn't have to be really wild, but to get poetic language shooting through your mind, the wilder the dream, the better! Any dream you have had that did not make sense will do. If you can't remember one, make up one or write one a friend has told you about. An example of a wild, nonsense dream would be: *I was driving my house through a sky filled with blueberries when the king ordered the lions set loose. Mirrors blinded the moonlight and I was thrown into a huge marshmallow. I struggled to stay afloat, but as I was sinking, I woke up.* As you notice, the wild dream has no connection with the comparisons. Write your wild dream.
6. E equals emotion. Emotion is the stock in trade for poets: they want their audience to feel their anger, know their love. If a poem does nothing else but create an emotion, it is successful.
7. For this portion of the formula, select an emotion and describe an event or situation that could arouse that emotion in you. An example would be: *Freeway drivers who suddenly cut in front of me make me livid with rage.* Or another: *Standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon creates in me a sense of awe, of wonder at the universe.* Write an emotion and describe its cause.



ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 7



8. Now, having written the above, you have all the elements to form a poem. For this first poem I suggest you go totally bananas. Look back over the various words you have written. Mix them up in a new way. Try for a strange combination of words that does *not* make sense. My theory is that if you are new to writing poetry, you will have a tendency to strive too hard for meaning. You may lose the sense of word play that is vital to poetry.

Two more rules:

1. *Do not use rhyme.* Explanation will be given later.
2. *Write the words in any form that looks like a poem to you.*

Here's an example of a nonsense poem formed from the italicized words on the previous page:

The Grand Canyon cut in the freeway
While the king's blueberries
Became a garbage pit of fireworks.
Marshmallow lions sank
In the moonlight
While raging at the mirrors
In the sunset.

Notice from the example that you do not have to use every word you previously wrote, but the words should be as mixed up as possible.

So what's the point? A poem that doesn't make sense? A listing of words in a slightly crazy way? Take a look at any volume of the world's greatest poems, some of which are in your literature text. You will find a few poems that apparently don't make sense, at least on a first reading. *But these poems do combine words in fresh and unusual ways.* Poets know that if they capture us with their fascinating use of words, we will stay around long enough to figure out the meaning.

“... combine words in fresh and unusual ways ...”

ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM - 8

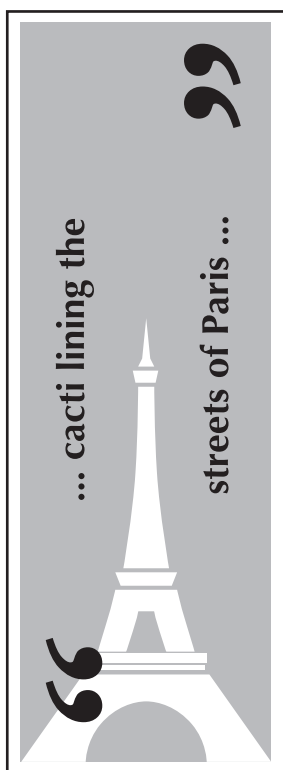


ANYONE CAN WRITE A POEM—VERSION B

Student guidelines and sample poem

If you are like me, you will want to write nonsense poetry only for practice in word play. What you probably want to do is write a poem with sense and emotion, something that expresses a part of you. The same formula, with slightly varied directions, can assist you here.

1. Think of the name of a person you know quite well. (I'm thinking of a friend named Doris, who was born in Arizona, loves Arizona, but also loves to see the world through travel to other countries.)
2. Write a person's name on your paper. Now, beginning with the formula, think of a non-living object that reminds you of this person. Use any object: a tile floor, an airplane, a city street, a wall. (My example: *Doris is a boulder etched with beauty from the desert cycle of drought and flood.*)
3. Next, add a second comparison, thinking of an animal related to your subject. Use any animal: a cockroach, a butterfly, an elephant. (*Doris is an Arizona mountain lion, seeking a quiet place under the stars.*)
4. Does the person you are writing about have wild dreams? If so, write down one of them or make up a wild dream you think the person could have. Or, if you feel this is better suited to your subject, write the person's dream or goal in life. Or create any kind of dream you think would fit your subject. (*Doris dreams of cacti lining the streets of Paris. She walks among them on a summer evening and enjoys the imitation Arizona sunset.*)
5. Your last information about the person is to select the emotion most typical of the person. Name it and write what you think might create that emotion in your subject. (*Calmness. Peace descends like dawn whenever Doris views the mountains around her.*)
6. As before, combine the elements into a poem. Mix up the words any way you desire, but strive to make sense. Leave out anything that does not seem to fit. Add any words that do fit. *Do not use rhyme.* Write the words in any form that looks like a poem to you.
7. A poem about Doris might be this:
Doris,
Surviving drought and flood,
Is a mountain lion seeking quiet places.
She walks among the cacti
Which line her life,
And quiet peace
Flows down from the mountains.



WE ARE ALL POETS

P O E

When I first began teaching, I discovered that most students groaned whenever I announced a poetry unit. I found this strange, since most of them spent a good portion of their after-school hours enjoying and using our most common forms of poetry—song lyrics and greeting cards.

Furthermore, I found that I had many, many students who liked to write poetry, but often hated to admit it. Eventually, I came up with the idea of using poetry patterns to encourage *all* students to express their thoughts with poetry. For some years now, I have shared these techniques with other teachers, who have taught students all over the country.

“

... we do
sponsor a
poetry writing
competition ...

”

I know that all of us have poetry within us waiting to be discovered. If you follow the patterns and approaches your teacher presents, you will learn to write in new, pleasing ways that will demonstrate your increasing power to express your thoughts and feelings. Many of the techniques of poetry will help all your writing, whether a personal letter or a formal report, to be more specific, lively, and meaningful to your audience. Also, you will find more and more occasions to use your new poetry skills, perhaps to write a poem to celebrate a friend's special day.

T R Y

In my classroom, my students and I share our writing. I certainly would like to see or hear all of your poems, but obviously that is impossible. At **Interact** we sponsor a poetry writing competition for students of teachers who have purchased this program. Later on you may decide to enter.

As you know, words have power to hurt, to help, to amuse. I hope these approaches will help you gain more power over words, and that you will write many poems meaningful to your life.

POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS - 1

Student handouts to be prepared for this pattern:

- POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS—PART A, page 3:13
- POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS—PART B, page 3:14
- THE PROBLEM WITH RHYME, from **Observations**, page 4:12

Unlike the *Anyone Can Write a Poem* formula, the *Wonderings* approach is a genuine pattern; that is, certain required lines must be copied and used by the student. This pattern continues the non-threatening approach to getting students to try writing something they may have little confidence in doing.

Since it is a very structured pattern, the *Wonderings* poem is a good one to use early. As with all the patterns, encourage students to be humorous, if they wish. They may also mix humor with serious comments. We want to pull them away from the idea that all poems have to be deadly somber. Also, if we emphasize “seriousness” of the poems, the students will not write about what is serious to them, but what they think is serious to the teacher. In such a way we lose the honesty in writing that we need.

“
...
write your
own poem
a day or so
before you
teach this
pattern
...
”

I would encourage you to *write your own poem a day or two before you teach this pattern*. Read your poem to the class along with the examples on the student guideline sheets.

Note the portions of each poem in parentheses. This requirement deliberately attempts to get students to write more details, rather than simply name things. On the first attempt, many students will probably cut these words in parentheses short. I encourage them, however, to extend them, using appropriate specific details.

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND—Sample 1

The first poem in the student guideline sheet is my original pattern poem that I wrote about in *How PATTERNS Came to Be* section. As a teacher you probably noticed that I put in a little propaganda about those students who do no work in a class. Obviously, that grew out of my desire to suggest to those particular students that, even though they had identified learning problems, they still had to do the work, a lesson that some were quite reluctant to learn!

One way of introducing the pattern is to suggest that poets love to deal in questions. Sometimes poets will pose a question at the beginning of a poem, then attempt to answer it. Frequently they ask the question at the end of the poem, leaving the reader to decide whether or not the poet has found an answer. Both approaches are symptoms of the poet's *wonderings* about life and people. One way in which most of us

POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS - 2

express our “wonderings” is to begin a sentence by saying, “I don’t understand ...” Then we state all the things we don’t understand.

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND—Sample 2

The second poem is another variation of the pattern. I want students to see early in the program that even at this stage where required lines are stated, each poem will still be different.

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND—Sample 3

The third poem is a sample of using the pattern to describe one unified subject rather than a miscellaneous collection of thoughts. Once your students become familiar with the pattern, you may want to return to it, selecting any subject currently being discussed in your classroom as a topic for this pattern. After your students become accustomed to the idea of writing poems, they will turn out some of these patterns fairly rapidly. You could take the last 10 or 15 minutes of a class hour when you have introduced some new concept to the class and ask them to write a *I Do Not Understand* poem about the subject. Doing so enables you to easily determine how successful your presentation was.

“

...

how would
Walt Whitman
handle this
pattern?

...

”

Additional ways of using this pattern As with many of my patterns, this one could be used with the students writing from the viewpoint of a historical or literary person, past or present. Other than writing their own view of the person, they could also take the persona of that person. For example, how would Walt Whitman handle this pattern? What are the things he would not understand? Or Emily Dickinson? Thomas Paine? Theodore Roosevelt? If you’re teaching science, what could Albert Einstein have to say in a *I Do Not Understand* pattern? As usual, the poems could be humorous or serious.

The problem with rhyme This observation contains my views of why I don’t permit my students to write in rhyme the first semester. Interestingly enough, when I permit rhyme during the second semester, most students do not use it. They have discovered the power that free verse can have. Many students will try rhyme occasionally and are successful with it. However, if you allow rhyme before students really know what a poem is, you will more than likely receive an overwhelmingly large number of poems that simply don’t work.

The pattern I usually use for the next assignment is *Telling a Few Delightful Lies*.

POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS - 3



POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS—PART A

Student guidelines and sample poems

The *Wonderings* pattern expresses those strange or usual events and people in life that leave us baffled. This is a pattern poem that requires you to use certain phrases and allows you to invent most of the rest of the poem.

1. Begin the poem with the words “I do not understand.”
2. List three things you do not understand about the world or people. As in the examples, these may be important things or unimportant things, serious or humorous.
3. Then name the thing you do not understand the most. This should be something fairly important to you. State it; then add some specific details about it.
4. End with an example of something you do understand. This may be serious or humorous, important or unimportant. Again, state it and then add a longer, specific explanation.

Sample poem #1: I DO NOT UNDERSTAND

I do not understand
why people are not curious about the world
why dogs always bark
why cats don't trust anyone
But most of all, I do not understand
why people blame others for their own failures.
(I've seen students tremble with rage
ready to kill a teacher
if they could get away with it
because they failed a course
in which they did no work.)
What I understand most are cameras
they do what you tell them to do
warn you if there's not enough light
and if you can see to focus
will give you a color picture
without arguing about anything.



POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS - 4



POEMS ABOUT WONDERINGS—PART B

Student guideline and additional samples

Sample poem #2: I DO NOT UNDERSTAND

I do not understand
why some people must have revenge
why some people live for drugs
why others live for money

*List three things you
do not understand.*

But most of all I do not understand
why we fought a war over oil
yet still drive as if gasoline
will flow forever.
(I still see drivers burning rubber
driving well over 65 on the freeway
going to work alone
like kings in their royal cars)

*List something that
really baffles you.*

What I understand most are people
who find answers to hard questions,
who shine their individual light of hope
into dark places seeking to help others,
willing to share their corner of the planet
and saying with a friendly smile,
“We’re all in this together.”

*List something you
do not understand
and give examples.*

“
... who shine
their individual
light of hope ...
”

This pattern can also be used to discuss a single subject.

Sample poem #3: I DO NOT UNDERSTAND

I do not understand
why state fair rides are so expensive
why freak shows attract people
why the food smells so good and tastes so bad,

But most of all I do not understand
why I tramp through the exhibits,
year after year, hot, stuffy halls
packed with crowds of people,
to see Grandma Jones’ quilt
or some farmer’s prize cow.

What I understand most are families wandering together
munching corn dogs and cotton candy,
laughing with their wild-eyed children
shrieking with excitement of stuffed teddy bears
and the noisy madness of the annual carnival.