

THE

*Write*

THING

KWAME  
ALEXANDER'S

GUIDE  
FOR

INSPIRING  
Student Writers



# **THE** *Write* **THING**

**KWAME ALEXANDER'S**

GUIDE FOR  **INSPIRING**  
Student Writers

© 2026 KA Productions, LLC  
All rights reserved.

This book has been filed with the Library of Congress.  
LCCN: 2026020120  
ISBN 979-8-3309-2356-4

Edited by Cathy Hernandez  
Cover design by Colleen Pidel  
Interior design by Robin Erickson

See page 210 for the credits.

The classroom teacher may reproduce copies of materials in this book for classroom use only. The reproduction of any part for an entire school or school system is strictly prohibited. No part of this publication may be transmitted, stored, or recorded in any form without written permission from the publisher.

Website addresses included in this book are public domain and may be subject to changes or alterations of content after publication of this product. Shell Education does not take responsibility for the future accuracy or relevance and appropriateness of website addresses included in this book. Please contact the company if you come across any inappropriate or inaccurate website addresses, and they will be corrected in product reprints.

All companies, websites, and products mentioned in this book are registered trademarks of their respective owners or developers and are used in this book strictly for editorial purposes. No commercial claim to their use is made by the author or the publisher.



A division of Teacher Created Materials, Inc.  
5482 Argosy Avenue  
Huntington Beach, CA 92649-1039  
**[www.tcmpub.com/shell-education](http://www.tcmpub.com/shell-education)**



# Contents

|                                                                                  |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Foreword: Discovering the Neglected Genre</b> . . . . .                       | 1   |
| <b>Preface: An Unconventional, Uncommon Writing Experience</b> . . . . .         | 3   |
| <b>Introduction: Finding Your Writing Groove</b> . . . . .                       | 7   |
| <b>Part 1: Writing</b> . . . . .                                                 | 15  |
| <b>Chapter One:</b> Setting the Stage: Why Start with Poetry? . . . . .          | 17  |
| <b>Chapter Two:</b> Launching <i>The Write Thing</i> in Your Classroom . . . . . | 29  |
| <b>Chapter Three:</b> Preparing to Write . . . . .                               | 43  |
| <b>Chapter Four:</b> Writing the Draft . . . . .                                 | 58  |
| <b>Chapter Five:</b> Revising Is Re-Envisioning . . . . .                        | 77  |
| <b>Part 2: Publishing</b> . . . . .                                              | 89  |
| <b>Chapter Six:</b> Making Student-Run Publishing a Priority . . . . .           | 91  |
| <b>Chapter Seven:</b> Step-by-Step Book Publishing . . . . .                     | 102 |
| <b>Part 3: Presenting</b> . . . . .                                              | 113 |
| <b>Chapter Eight:</b> Presenting Student Work. . . . .                           | 115 |
| Acknowledgments . . . . .                                                        | 126 |
| Appendixes . . . . .                                                             | 129 |
| Appendix A: Lesson Resources . . . . .                                           | 132 |
| Appendix B: Poetry Form Mini-Lessons . . . . .                                   | 144 |
| Appendix C: Book Publishing Resources . . . . .                                  | 174 |
| References . . . . .                                                             | 195 |
| Index . . . . .                                                                  | 197 |
| Digital Resources and Video URLs . . . . .                                       | 206 |
| About the Author . . . . .                                                       | 208 |



## *Introduction*

# **Finding Your Writing Groove**

---

“When you’re teaching kids to write, you’re teaching kids to think.  
Writing is the window through which all thinking starts.”

—Sheryl Block, former fourth grade and  
special education teacher

---

Poet and children’s book author Ralph Fletcher says, “We need to show students the invisible stairs that writers climb from inspiration to the finished product.” As a published author and a literacy professional, I am particularly experienced in coaching students up the writing and publishing mountain. How I arrived at this summit is a case study in child labor practice, happenstance, and improvisation.

I grew up with a father who wrote books and owned a publishing company. My mother wrote children’s books and taught English. Books lined our walls and were stacked on floors in each room: biographies, history, fiction, textbooks, visual art, memoirs, children’s literature, folklore, poetry. We read for fun, for punishment, for relaxation, even for competition. My very first writing workshop took place in our family room, where my siblings and I made up stories about the places we traveled and the people, real and imagined, we met, then shared them in family talent shows and as bedtime tales. This was our ritual. But, there was another side to this. I worked for my father’s publishing company. And, I loathed it.

As a tween student, I was involved from concept to shelf in the book publishing process. From typing to stapling direct-mail catalogues to exhibiting books at trade shows, I was immersed in literature and publishing daily while my friends played video games and rode bikes.

Don’t get me wrong, I did get to play outside, but only after the inventory had been completed.

When I left for college, I had but one goal: to get as far away from books as I could, as fast as possible. So, I majored in biochemistry with every intention of becoming



a doctor, until I encountered organic chemistry, and quickly changed my major to something more familial: English. After a series of classes and workshops with dynamic and inspiring creative writing professors such as Nikki Giovanni, my appreciation for story came full circle. I was back in my family room, only this time I decided that my literary pursuits would be life-sustaining, not just fodder for bedtime entertainment. I was going to write for a living. But not just pen to paper. My plans included hosting writing retreats, producing book festivals, publishing other writers, and teaching writing. So, I did. I was leading a full writerly life. And, I loved it.

Which brings us to Book-in-a-Day.

## Creating a Student–Run Publishing Enterprise

From 1995 to 2005, I operated my own publishing company, continued conducting writing workshops in middle and high schools across the country, and wrote seven books, including *Do the Write Thing: 7 Steps to Publishing Success*. I'd been asked by novice writers, on a regular basis, how to publish a book. That book was my answer.

“*Do the Write Thing (DTWT)* is like Publishing 101. It is designed for the novice who wants to learn the ABCs of book publishing. This reading will be similar to the first time you rode a bike. Remember when your father guided you down the sidewalk day after day? Then, one Saturday he let you ride by yourself. Just like that. And while you did fall a few times, eventually through practice, courage, and ingenuity, you mastered it. Unlike most publishing how-to books, which seem to get mired down in every possible detail and tedious direction, this book will give you a general map drawn in bright colors, and leave it up to you to chart your own course. I will impart my knowledge if you promise to tap into your creativity. My purpose is to teach you the mechanics of book publishing so that you feel confident enough to ‘ride by yourself.’”

—Preface of *Do the Write Thing: 7 Steps to Publishing Success*



## The Beginning

I loved the bike riding metaphor in the preface. Apparently, so did a lot of other people. Suddenly, I became a budding expert in the field of self-publishing, and writers were turning to my text to help them find their literary stride. One such writer was Dana Davidson, a young adult novelist who also happened to be an AP English teacher in Detroit, Michigan (a Newsweek/WDIV-TV Outstanding Teacher Awardee, in fact). She'd read my book and asked if I would consider facilitating a publishing workshop for her high school seniors. Over the course of the school year, her students had written fiction, essays, articles, axioms, and poems, and she wanted to reward them with a book. There was one hitch, however. She wanted me to teach the students so that they could do the actual publishing work themselves. That, and she only had one day for all of this to occur. Naturally, always one to embrace a challenge, I said "Yes!" and made my way to the Great Lake state.

There were thirty-five students in each of Dana's five classes, which began at 7:30 in the morning and concluded at 4:30 in the afternoon. Like Bobby McFerrin leading a choir of singers in a musical experience that is completely improvisational, for those nine hours we created powerful melodies, rhythms, and textures. One class proofread, another created a title and designed a cover. Each group of students became a different department in our makeshift publishing company. By the end of the day, our performance, birthed out of a literal celebration of spontaneity, was complete. Two weeks later, copies of their paperback book, *Unspoken*, were delivered to the school, and a book party was held where students presented poems from the book to an excited audience of teachers, parents, friends, and educators. They autographed copies. They became proud authors. I bet you're wondering how it all went down, right? Keep reading.

## Transforming Young Lives

Word got around that I'd just helped a group of students publish a book in a day, and requests started coming in for me to work my magic at other schools. Unfortunately, most of the student work lacked the quality of the students in Dana's classes. The writing just didn't "behave." Rather than publish student work that was not up to par, I began offering a prerequisite writing workshop, with a focus on accessible and authentic poetry as the literary vehicle, prior to the publishing workshop. I began to model my unconventional writing workshop for teachers, sharing my tools to get students excited about writing. When it was time to meet with their students, there had to be a structure, because it was called Book-in-a-Day, and I only had five hours with each group of students. Of course, I left enough room for flexibility within those five hours in case



I had a creative epiphany or brainstorm (and I had many, thanks to the intellectual curiosity and diversity of the different students). Teachers were surprised that students, who typically had to be dragged to pen and paper, were now composing haiku.

While facilitating a middle school writing workshop in Singapore, a group of teachers shared with me their surprise that a boy who loathed reading and writing had become one of the workshop's fiercest advocates. He regularly volunteered correct answers to my questions; he eagerly shared his masterpieces with the group; and when students got a little loud and distracted, he shhhushed! them. Talk about the power of writing to transform young lives.



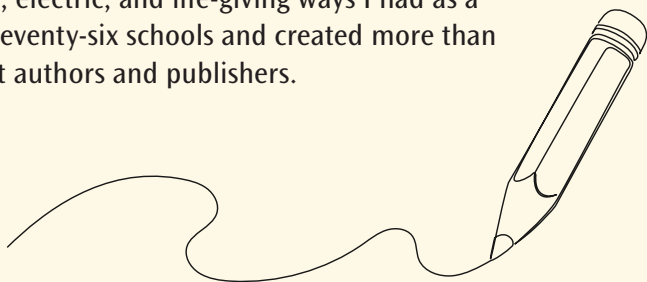
## Solo Act: Deanna Nikaido

### Book-in-a-Day Literacy Coach

When I was first introduced to the Book-in-a-Day literacy program, I was excited at the thought of helping a few students get their own work published, which was something no one else was doing. In many ways, in the beginning, it was beyond the students' (and teachers') dreams to actually do something significant like publish a book (in a day). There were so many unknowns. When working with young people, it's sometimes difficult to tell if or how you're making a difference. Thank goodness for the students who came up to us during break on the first day offering candid pages of their soul for us to read. But what about the students who had rarely, if ever, set foot upon the boat of their own words; never fully untied it from the dock, set it afloat, or let the throttle full out? I think what surprised me most were these students: the middle school boy who sat twirling his blank sheet of paper until the last hour of the day who ended up writing a love poem to his girl from the viewpoint of a football field; the third-grade boy who says he has nothing to write about and then stands up eager to share his poem about his brother who died and is surprised by his own tears; the high school girl who tells us how poetry saved her life; or the fifth grader from Canada who wrote, "Poems are like ships that take you away to places where you can let out what's inside of you. Poetry can be like wind, hard to catch but easy to feel. Those words that are jumbled inside of you can be expressed in a way to make a poem take you to a new world."

## Helping Students Find Their Voices

The goal of Book-in-a-Day was for students to “find their voices” so that they could uncover and express the woes and wonders of their world. And it worked. Each workshop became a community of empowered voices. We laughed. We cried. We connected with literature in the same vital, electric, and life-giving ways I had as a child. During those nine years, we visited seventy-six schools and created more than five thousand engaged and excited student authors and publishers.



During Book-in-a-Day’s nearly ten-year tenure, we worked with high schools, middle schools, elementary schools, the deaf community, and incarcerated youth, publishing over five thousand student authors. I was always amazed by the students’ willingness to be candid. Some hoped that by being published, someone would read their words. Really listen. Maybe a parent or someone they liked or had a fight with. Some felt their poems and stories could be megaphones traveling into the world to make a difference. Others just needed to share the best or worst moments of their day. Whatever the reason, these youth had a lot on their hearts and minds. They wanted to be heard.

For reasons I can’t explain, poetry has always been a safe and acceptable way to say just about anything you want or need to express. It is the art of painting with words; building a bridge between the heart and mind; developing an emotional intelligence, which is even more necessary now in this Digital Age where connection is becoming more and more virtual. Poems look you in the eye. I like to think of poetry as a jump-off to other forms of writing—prose, plays, nonfiction. So, for teachers who want to try other literary forms, you’ll find some new mini-lessons and ideas in this edition.

I had no idea that this program to create a handful of student authors would catch fire in the way it has or become the compass these young people needed to be able to access their own unique voices, to say what they want to say as they journey into their own possibilities.

## How to Use *The Write Thing*

The three-part writing experience presented in this book—writing, publishing, and presenting—captures the tools, techniques, and energy of Book-in-a-Day. Students participate in different types of writing: modeled, shared, interactive, and independent. *The Write Thing* and Book-in-a-Day are interchangeable terms. Think of this book as a guide to getting your students engaged with and excited about writing, reading, and speaking. It is designed for teachers who crave a literary jumpstart—part how-to, part inspiration.

The book is organized around a series of running features:

- Kwame QuickTips
- Solo Acts (voices from the field)
- Share Your Story (Writing Fiction and Nonfiction)
- Lessons in Action
- KwameTime Videos
- You Can Too!
- Questions for Kwame
- And lots of poetry and prose!

Lessons in Action are woven throughout the book at points of need. I've avoided designating grade levels because a good lesson is a good lesson—and I know you'll do what effective teachers always do: adapt it to fit the unique needs and interests of your students. You'll change it up if you work with older, sophisticated students, and you may simplify if your youngsters are just finding their way into the exciting new world of reading and writing. The Questions for Kwame throughout the book include both questions students ask when I visit them and frequently asked questions by teachers.

## What About Time?

Out of necessity, our Book-in-a-Day workshop was one day, two at most. Your writing experience doesn't have to follow such a rigid timeline—it could be a week, a month, a semester—or better yet, a new writerly way of life for you and your students. What's most important here is that you listen to the music of your students, be inspired, orchestrate, help them find their groove, and just jam!



### KwameTime Video for Teachers

*The Write Thing* Overview



## Appendix and Digital Resources

Please look through the appendixes of this book (pages 129–193) for a wealth of mini-lessons, guidelines, checklists, and forms to help you and your students during various stages of *The Write Thing* writing experience. All student-facing activity pages mentioned throughout the book are provided in digital form for your easy reference and use. The sample writings shared throughout the book are also provided digitally to encourage you to display them for shared or modeled reading opportunities. See page 206 for more information about the digital resources provided with this product.

## How to Access and Use KwameTime Videos

Interacting with students and teachers and sharing my love of poetry is such a big part of my job. And, I love it. Thing is, save for cloning, I can't be at every school. Unless . . .

Want to bring me into your classroom to assist with *The Write Thing*? Want a smiling, handsome poet to help jumpstart your class? This book includes a series of video clips of me in action. See page 206 for more information.

The clips are divided into two menus: Kwame Guides Teachers and Kwame Guides Students (and, as you'll notice, some clips work for both you and your students). The good news: you can watch them again and again, as many times as you might find useful—Kwame on an endless feedback loop (I may even slip a few poems in there for your enjoyment)!

| Page | Kwame Guides Teachers                      |
|------|--------------------------------------------|
| 12   | <i>The Write Thing</i> Overview            |
| 18   | The Essential Importance of Writing        |
| 72   | Model Lesson: Haiku                        |
| 77   | Revising Poetry                            |
| 91   | Why Publish?                               |
| 107  | Setting Up Your Classroom Publishing Teams |
| 115  | Presenting Tips and Techniques             |
| 125  | Kwame's Top 10 <i>The Write Thing</i> Tips |

| Page | Kwame Guides Students                      |
|------|--------------------------------------------|
| 44   | Defining Poetry                            |
| 61   | Introducing Spine Poems                    |
| 62   | Introducing Borrowed Poems                 |
| 71   | Introducing Haiku                          |
| 80   | RE-vising Your Poems                       |
| 99   | Publishing: Put Your Words into the World! |
| 103  | Brainstorming a Book Title                 |
| 109  | Setting Up a Classroom Publishing Company  |
| 116  | Presenting 101: Tips for Success           |

## KwameTime Videos

# Setting the Stage: Why Start with Poetry?

“Poetry is serious, playful, all-encompassing,  
specific, divine, incomprehensible.”

–Wynton Marsalis

The world is hungry for words of hope, change, humor, and love, and a classroom writing activity has the ability to conjure up the kind of meaningful and creative energy of the imagination that we all crave. The writing classroom is a gathering of passionate ideas and opinions. It is the birthplace of creative inspiration and illumination. It is the room where our students can go to imagine and reimagine the world for themselves, and for us. And, it must take place in an hour, more or less.

## Share Your Story

### Fiction and Nonfiction Writing with Stan Tucker

My friend and colleague Stanley Tucker, aka Stan the Man, doesn't write poetry, but he loves writing fiction and nonfiction, and he thinks the only thing better than writing is teaching kids how to write. So, if you're okay with it, he's going to shadow me along on this journey. Stan will make it super easy for teachers to implement this writing and publishing experience. In the Share Your Story features, he'll offer some clear steps for using prose to develop imagination and empathy and foster critical thinking, information literacy, and the ability to connect with the real world.

“Stan, you ready?”

“We've all got a story to share. We need to help students see that their story matters, that they can become authors themselves. Let's go, Kwame!”



Sure, classroom periods may dictate the amount of time we have for writing on a given day, but the most important thing is having designated writing time that students can expect, look forward to, and prepare for, mentally and otherwise. Still, because the amount of time is relatively short, some of our students may be a little harder to reach, either because of disinterest, fear, aptitude, or all three. No worries, I've got a foolproof method that guarantees you will reach even the most reluctant and recalcitrant of learners. It's worked for me in Iowa and Canada, South Carolina and London, summer writing programs and juvenile detention facilities, libraries and special needs programs, secondary and elementary schools. Mounting evidence shows that writing is a crucial component of effective literacy instruction (Graham 2020). When students are engaged regularly in writing, they show improvements in reading comprehension, math, science, and social studies (Reeves 2002), or as Margaret Atwood says, "A word after a word after a word is power." No one doubts the power of writing or the critical importance it should play in all students' lives:

"At its best, writing has helped transform the world. Revolutions have been started by it. Oppression has been toppled by it. And it has enlightened the human condition."

—National Commission on Writing

With these findings in mind, getting children to be motivated, successful writers is a key component of effective literacy instruction, as well as overall student achievement, and there's no more accessible gateway than poetry. In my Book-in-a-Day workshops, I always began with poetry. Its inherent conciseness was less intimidating to even the most uneager writers, and it allowed students to produce a completed piece of work within the constraints of a five-hour workshop.

Poetry engages students in writing in ways that other genres do not. Because poetry does not have the same demands as prose, it offers students greater freedom (Routman 2001). The wide scope of poetry also allows students to express themselves



### **KwameTime Video for Teachers**

The Essential Importance  
of Writing



in many different ways by experimenting with different styles and forms. Success with writing poetry can create enthusiasm that then makes other writing tasks feel more manageable.

## Questions for Kwame

**Will teaching creative writing work with my English learners?**

Sí! Vâng! Yes! Students' feelings and creativity are already abundant. English is just another tool to share them. Poetry, in particular, allows readers to concentrate on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar patterns, and voice in manageable, confidence-building doses. It turns writing practice into sound-play, image-making, and story-telling—exactly the kinds of skills students need to grow into confident, flexible writers. Plus, poetry invites a personal voice and cultural story, where a student's home language can be centered and used to grow their language skills. Let your budding writers compose two versions, one piece of writing in their first language and one in English. Over time, they can revise and see how their growth in language skills affects their writing.





## Solo Act: Penny Kittle

### Teacher and Author

When students are exposed to modern poets and spoken word, it lights up the room. My students write more when we read poetry. They get excited to talk about a line or a phrase and come up with something on their own. They begin to hear language differently. Within poems are all of these amazing ways to talk about brevity, consistency, clarity, the effective use of literary devices—not just naming them, but using them. That’s such a critical difference because we don’t want to just teach stuff, we want to help kids write better by knowing this stuff. I read poems every day because I’m constantly trying to figure out the best way to say something.

Also, if you’ve noticed, there has been this shift with a burst of poetic novels growing very, very popular with kids. It’s not because there are fewer words, it’s because we’ve all become accustomed to brevity. I don’t want you to explain this thing for six pages, I want you to deliver it. And poetry tends to really speak to that.

## Kwame QuickTip

You can fill the writing experience with a range of writing across genres, which establishes for students the main purposes for which we write: narrative, informative/explanatory, and opinion/argument. But for easy-to-launch, guaranteed immediate success, it’s hard to beat poetry.

I have a guiding belief in the power of poetry to connect with young writers, reluctant and avid, in transformative and profound ways. Georgia Heard (2024) suggests that we use poems as transitions, immersing students in accessible poems first and then building on that foundation. I couldn’t agree more. Poetry is the bridge to get our children to appreciate and understand how to imagine and reimagine possibility through creative language, to embrace more complex and longer forms of literature.



## The Essential Joy of Poetry

Poetry is a powerful method to engage students in writing that is meaningful to them. Young people use poetry to express emotions, manage stress, and make sense of difficult experiences. Students who write poetry are more likely to say that writing helps them relax, feel happy, build confidence, and express their thoughts and feelings. They are also about twice as likely to enjoy writing, write daily, and see themselves as good writers (Cole et al. 2022).

Poetry supports students in developing voice by centering lived experience and identity. When poetry is taught as an experience rather than something to analyze, it helps students form personal connections to language and see themselves as writers with something worth saying (Ahn and Minuk 2025). And yet, despite its power, poetry is not given the attention it deserves.

Don't get me wrong, I love that my ten-year-old neighbor is reading *Charlotte's Web* and *The Outsiders*, but I'd also love it if she were reading Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" (now, that'd be real cool!) or Renée Watson's Newbery medal-winning novel-in-verse, *All the Blues in the Sky*. We no longer need to be afraid of poetry. For so long, we've been taught that poetry is staid, complicated, unfamiliar, and now many of us believe it. When poetry behaves (as Nikki Giovanni liked to say), it is not. But, when did poetry become something intimidating and inaccessible? It often happens, unfortunately, in a middle and high school English classroom, but parents and teachers can turn this around.

## Solo Act: Marjory Wentworth

### Former Poet Laureate of South Carolina

I started the day by having the children write wish poems. Each poem began with the line "I wish." This writing exercise comes from the book *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* by Kenneth Koch. Mr. Koch taught poetry in New York City elementary schools, and this book is the result of those experiences. Now, just imagine what happens when you ask schoolchildren, or anyone else for that matter, what they wish for? In order to demystify the poetry-writing process, I had the children begin by writing a class poem about things they wished for. Each child contributed a line, and when I put them all together, we had a poem. It was easy, quick, and FUN.



When students are enjoying themselves, they pay closer attention, they follow directions, and they care about what they're writing because it matters a lot to them. The stillness and concentration that happens whenever students begin writing poems is extraordinary to witness.

These third graders at Dunston Elementary School in North Charleston, South Carolina, wished for all sorts of fascinating things—new bicycles, a four-wheeler, a baby sister, a baby brother, more bling, a pinkie ring, a pair of kittens, a Jacuzzi, a swimming pool, a laptop, a black-and-white dog, a kazillion dollars, and so on. One little boy wrote that he wished for a friend. A number of children wished for things for their teachers—a big yellow diamond, a pink Cadillac. No one suggested they do this; the generosity came naturally.

The most amazing part of the day came when I was about to leave. A little boy named Jonathan stood right in front of me and started talking about his brain. Our conversation went something like this:

“Do you know how your brain has two parts to it? The top part that you use most of the time and that deep part that you hardly ever use?”

I nodded, wondering where this was going.

“Well,” he continued, looking up at me with enormous sincerity, “when I was writing my poem, I used that deep part of my brain the whole time.”

“Don’t you use that deep part a lot in school?”

“Not really,” he said, shaking his head.

“That’s creativity you’re describing. It’s a great feeling.”

“Creativity,” he repeated. “That’s what you call my really deep brain working?”

“Exactly.”

We must remember that many of the essential joys of poetry are the first ones we experience with language. Young children delight in the often-rhythmic sounds they make and hear. The first words that children speak emerge like a repetitive chant. In that way, a child’s first words are like a first poem. Children love to rhyme, and many



children's first books are rhymed books. Rhyming is fun. Words are fun. Let's also remember that young children already experience the world the way a poet does. Have you ever taken a toddler by the hand and tried to walk a few blocks? They notice everything—the sound of every passing car or insect, a coin shining on the sidewalk. Children's senses inform them as they move through the world. This is exactly how poets experience the world, which is why, when you read a poem, you can picture the images described or repeat a line over and over in your head, just to hear the sheer beauty of the sounds that the words make. These words, when strung together in a particular way, bring you joy. In some ways, it is that simple. Poetry must be enjoyed at this primal level.

My goal in this book is to help everyone find that joy again. To help spark a whole new relationship with poetry. I'm not saying that this book is going to change your teaching life, but I do know that since the age of twelve, when I wrote my very first poem for Mother's Day, poetry has changed mine. I've spent a lifetime writing poetry that matters, and now I want to teach you and your students to do the same.

## **The Transformative Power of Poetry**

A poem is a small but powerful thing. One third grader put it this way: Poetry is an egg with a horse inside it. It has the power to reach inside you, to ignite something in you, and to change you in ways you never imagined. There is a feeling of connection and communion—with the author and with the subject—when we read a poem that articulates our deepest feelings. That connection can be a vehicle on the road to creativity and imagination. Poems are the human soul condensed for our pleasure. When done right, they can inspire us—in our classrooms and in our homes—to write our own journeys, to find our own voices.

During one of my very first author visits, I remember a high school English teacher warning me that her students would not be engaged or responsive to my presentation, as many of them abhorred poetry. I asked her if she taught poetry, and she shared that she had taught it begrudgingly, as it was not her favorite either. I could relate.

When I was in high school, I was not interested in the poetry we learned in AP English. It was inaccessible, unrelatable and, quite frankly, boring. That is not to say that it was not valuable, because it was; these were the literary stalwarts of the canon, after all. True, we were learning, but our human souls weren't being moved in some significant way. And if you want a student to be moved by poetry, if you want to be moved by poetry, then you must share poetry with which you (and they) connect on an emotional level.

“There’s something that happened with poetry along the way where people started thinking of a measurable substance—you get it or you don’t get it. Just sweep that out of the room, and create a sense of love. What you don’t need for the teaching of poetry, I think, is to feel as if you’re an expert . . . but you do have to find places of real love within yourself, for lines, for voices, for topics, for ways of writing, for styles that will help you create a mood, an atmosphere where poetry becomes contagious.”

—Naomi Shihab Nye

### AND I HAVE YOU

Rain has drops  
Sun has shine  
Moon has beams  
That make you mine

Rivers have banks  
Sands for shores  
Hearts have heartbeats  
That make me yours

Needles have eyes  
Though pins may prick  
Elmer has glue  
To make things stick

Winter has Spring  
Stockings feet  
Pepper has mint  
To make it sweet

Teachers have lessons  
Soup du jour  
Lawyers sue bad folks  
Doctors cure

All and all  
This much is true  
You have me  
And I have you

—Nikki Giovanni

So many of us have been immersed, since grade school, in staid and incomprehensible poetry, that we feel disconnected from it. We’ve been taught that to understand a poem, we must first dissect it (we dissect frogs, not poetry), and so we’ve forgotten what poetry feels like. We’ve forgotten that sense of joy that comes from reading between the lines. We must seek out and find poetry that helps us rediscover that sense of love that Naomi Shihab Nye speaks of. (I’ve included some mentor texts on page 55 for your perusal.) Let’s use poetry as a ladder in the writing experience, carefully and intentionally taking each step and working our way up. This way, we are more apt to climb our way to a more heightened appreciation of language and literature.

There are a plethora of good reasons for teaching poetry in schools. Faced with the demands of data-driven decision-making and a cacophony of instructional practices, teachers have to discern the approaches that will have the greatest impact on student engagement and learning, as well as on growth (Holbrook 2005). Poetry is a key element for enriching students’ emotions, thoughts, and vocabulary. Poetry instruction focuses on exploring the rhythmic and auditory aspects of language, understanding word meanings, and mastering their usage, thereby enhancing students’ reading and comprehension skills (Fiore 2015).

When you hear the word *poetry* you might think, “That’s not part of my curriculum” or “I don’t have time.” The first may be true but the second doesn’t have to be. Poetry is a form of writing, a way of expressing oneself that can be incorporated

## Questions for Kwame

Out of every type of writing, why did you choose poetry?

I didn't; it chose me. I read so much of it as a kid, it just seeped into my head and my heart, and it consumed me. Also, because I love saying a whole lot in very few words. The white space is pretty spectacular. I love the words that aren't there that the reader fills in. How cool is that?



into your time and curricular constraints, that can integrate the arts in a content area. There is no rule that says that poetic expression cannot contain details of the Civil War, an interpretation of a piece of fiction, or even the process behind photosynthesis. If your students have an understanding of what you are teaching, why not let them respond in any form—including poetry? An I Remember poem (page 150) can be just that: What do you want your students to remember about animal habitats? Challenge them to write an I Am Pizzazz poem (page 148) from the perspective of a person in history. Polly Collins explains that having students write poems about what they are studying strengthens understanding because it helps them connect the topic to their own lives, to the world around them, and to the content texts they have read (2008). There are endless opportunities to incorporate poetry into your required content. Once given the choice, many students will ask to write in poetry form instead of prose. Let them have the freedom to explore. And watch their growth in literacy explode.

What's more, poetry addresses the demands of higher standards and more. Need to help your students craft precise words, phrases, and telling details? Try poetry. Nudging your students to wrap their writing heads around compare and contrast? Poetry is your best friend. What about domain-specific vocabulary and figurative meaning? You simply can't beat poetry for pure "turbocharged" skill work—when that's where you need to go with your students. As the poet Paul Janeczko (2011, 2) wrote:

Everything we teach has to be turbocharged with skills and the promise of advancing our students academically . . . And here's the cool thing: poetry can get you there. It is inherently turbocharged. Poets distill a novel's worth of content and emotion in a handful of lines. The literary devices you need to teach are all there.

## SCIENCE IS LIKE WRITING

In science I held up a prism.  
The sun made a rainbow  
on my book.

Our teacher explained  
about bending light.  
My friends all came to look.

Science is like writing.  
A poem takes white light in me  
and breaks it into colors  
for everyone to see.

—Amy Ludwig VanDerwater  
© 2010

So, let's try to change the conversation, create a different feeling, forge a new relationship with poetry. Ever listen to Wynton Marsalis and his Big Band live? I have and it's otherworldly. Instinctively, intimately, and immediately, you feel smarter, more connected. To yourself. Poetry does the same thing. It has the power to reach students, to tap into their emotional intelligence while allowing them to freely and openly express themselves. It can be the school where our children go to learn to write well. And here's the thing: They are already writing poetry, in their journals, on their phones, on walls, online, in their minds. They are ready to play, and this writing experience can help set the stage for them.

## Vision and Validation

Once, I met a young woman at a book signing. She looked smart, dressed classy, and smiled a lot. And, to top it off, she'd purchased my book. She came up to the table for an autograph, and I was spellbound. Words failed me. (Kinda ironic, right?) I lacked the confidence to let her know just how I felt in that moment: I was crushing. We exchanged email addresses, and I did what any self-respecting poet would do—composed a poem. (It was something about a wave, or Picasso, or her lips. You can probably find it in my memoir, *Why Fathers Cry at Night*.)

After she read the poem I'd written her, she sent me an email that said, "Here's my number, give me a ring." And a few years (and two hundred poems) later, get this, she married me.

Kathy Perfect claims poetry "nurtures a love and appreciation for the sound and power of language. Poetry can help us see differently, understand ourselves and others, and validate our human experience. It . . . enhances thinking skills and promotes personal connections" (1999, 728). Poetry sure worked for me, and it can definitely work for you and your students.