

TANNY McGREGOR

Genre Connections

Lessons to Launch Literary
and Nonfiction Texts

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

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Prologue

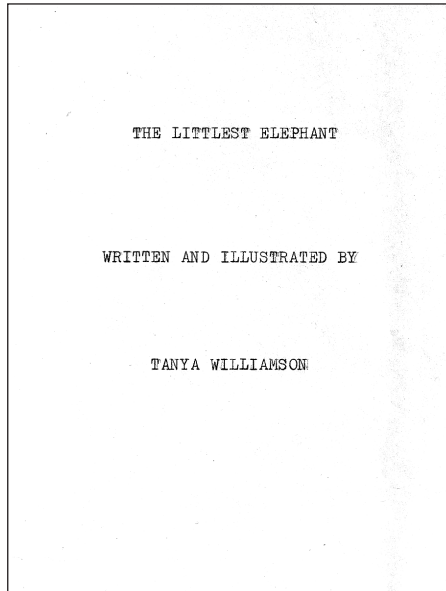
My First Book



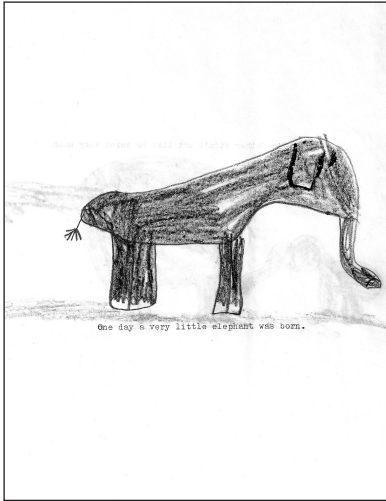
I'm glad you're considering reading this book. Honored, really. I mean, you are a busy person and there are a million other books you could choose to read. But as much as I hope you enjoy what you find here and put it to good use with your students, I can't help but wish you'd read my first book, first. I know it sounds ungrateful to say that. Like a sales ploy, even. To know why I think an understanding of genre is important, though, you've got to see where my thinking began.

Thankfully, Tobey and Smokey, my gracious editors, are allowing me to share my first book with you, right here, right now. And no, I'm not talking about *Comprehension Connections* (2007) or *Comprehension Going Forward* (2011). The book I'm talking about was written long before either of those. My first book is, by far, the most important book I've ever written. It is the book that made me an author.

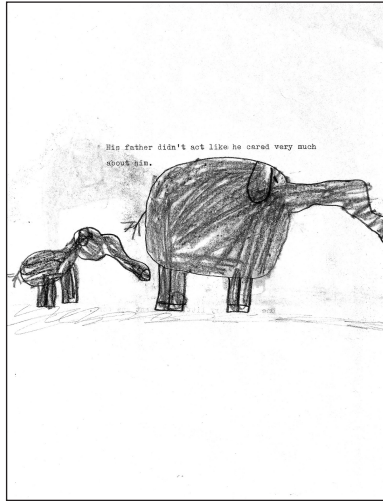
Writing my first book taught me more than all of the other pieces I've written since. I learned that words have power. I learned that people who might not listen to you when you talk *will* listen to you when you write. I learned that I could write about elephants or Easter eggs or anything I wanted. I didn't know it then, but I was learning about genre.



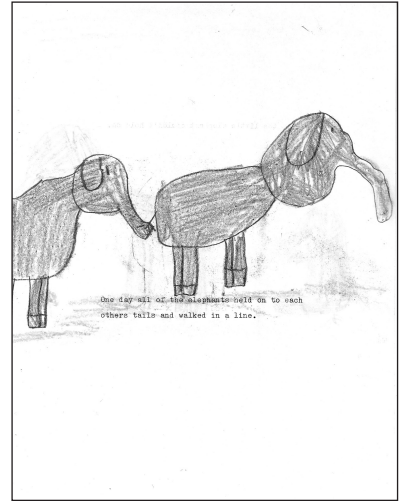
*The Littlest Elephant, Written
and Illustrated by Tanya (Tanny)
Williamson (McGregor)
Miss Hendel's Kindergarten Class, 1971*



*One day a very little elephant
was born.*

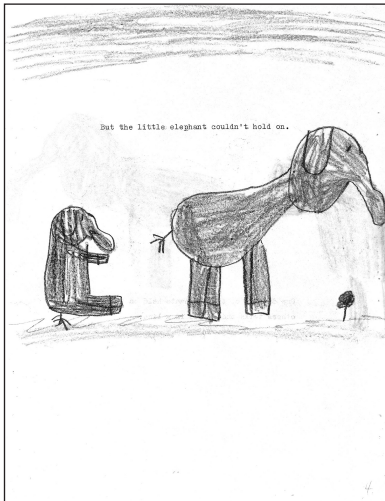


*His father didn't act like he cared
very much about him.*

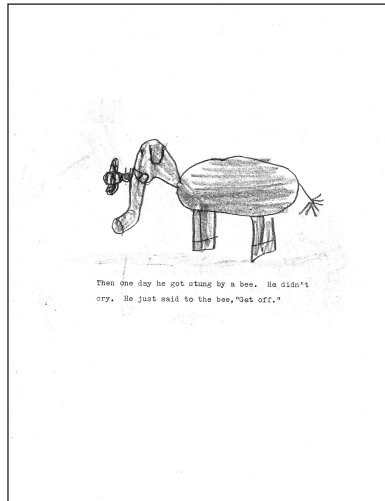


*One day all of the elephants held
on to each others tails and walked
in a line.*

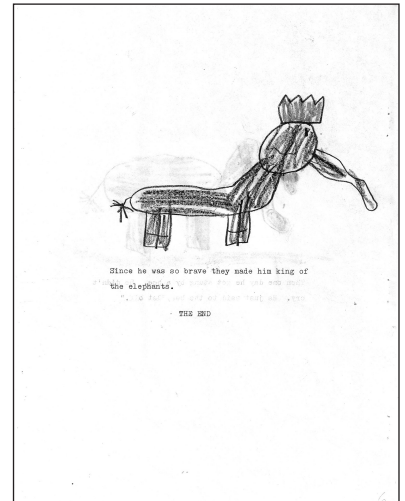
The Littlest Elephant wasn't the only book I wrote in 1971. And fiction wasn't the only genre. I also wrote *The Easter Egg Hunt* (a memoir) and *James' Birthday Party* (nonfiction). I tried out genres the way a chemist experiments with substances or a composer plays around with melodies. I remember feeling like a different person with each new genre I tried. When I wrote fiction, I felt free and creative, like no rules applied to me. When I wrote nonfiction, I felt like a reporter who had to get the facts right so others could learn from me. And around this same time, in 1970 and 1971, I was listening to and learning to read different genres and noticing how they made me feel . . . so lucky was I to have a mother and a kindergarten teacher who immersed me in all sorts of text.



But the little elephant couldn't hold on.



Then one day he got stung by a bee. He didn't cry. He just said to the bee, "Get off."



Since he was so brave they made him king of the elephants.
THE END

Like author Randy Bomer says, "Genre seems to be a psychological necessity for starting to write or read" (2003). I know it was for me. The better I understood the personality of the type of text I was writing or reading, the more meaningful the experience. And I'm still learning about those text personalities, even in the writing of this book.

It has been more than four decades since I wrote my first book. I've learned a lot about genre since then, and much of that learning is contained in this volume. For me, no book could ever top *The Littlest Elephant*, but I promise I gave it a royal try.

Tanny McGregor
Cincinnati, Ohio
2013

A Very Good Place to Start



ood instruction is a mingling of *why* and *how*. The *why* mixes rationale and research. The *how* combines engagement and creativity with everyday classroom instruction. I'll be honest: I sometimes rush through the why to get to the how. I just can't wait for the thrill of trying something new with my students, to give them, as Leonardo da Vinci calls it, "the noblest pleasure . . . the joy of understanding." But I know that I'll teach each lesson with stronger conviction and hold higher expectations for my students if I am confident in the why. Insight about the why leads me away from the flavor-of-the-day kind of instruction, and stops me from considering lessons that lack substance.

The Why

"In order to become competent, literate members of society, students must be able to navigate multiple genres. They need to know how to confidently read, write, and discuss narrative, informational, persuasive, and analytical texts. Because these forms of texts are unique and require unique strategies for reading and writing, it is not safe to assume that students who are competent with one genre will automatically master another. Students need to learn about particular genres through implicit experience and explicit instruction."

—from *Thinking Through Genre* by Heather Lattimer (2003)

My daughter Brynne puts a face on this quotation. One lazy winter afternoon at our house, during a span of about three hours, I watched Brynne navigate multiple genres, either for entertainment, necessity, or both. She read an iPhone manual, a novel titled *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, an Internet article about feline health, a few movie reviews, the menu on the Chipotle app, and a brochure containing safety guidelines for a space heater. Some of these she comprehended with ease, while others required slower, more deliberate reading, prompting her to ask questions along the way. Just like me, Brynne is more competent with some types of text than with others. Right before my eyes, however, she is becoming more and more prepared for the diverse and complex reading that lies ahead.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) echo this emphasis. In the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, a note on the range and content of student reading speaks out loud and clear:

To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements. By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. Students also acquire the habits of reading independently and closely, which are essential to their future success.

Our students will get implicit experience with various genres as they go about living their twenty-first-century lives. The explicit instruction, however, must come from you and me. The remaining chapters in this book are a collection of ideas about how to launch genres, how to introduce your students to the unique personalities of each, and how to build a curiosity and appreciation for what each genre has to offer. There are dozens of genres on the continuum between narrative (story) and expository (informational); this book will explore but a few. Any genre could be launched using the model in this book, however, like realistic fiction, mystery, or technical writing, for example. Use the seed ideas suggested in this volume with a genre of your choice and see how it grows!

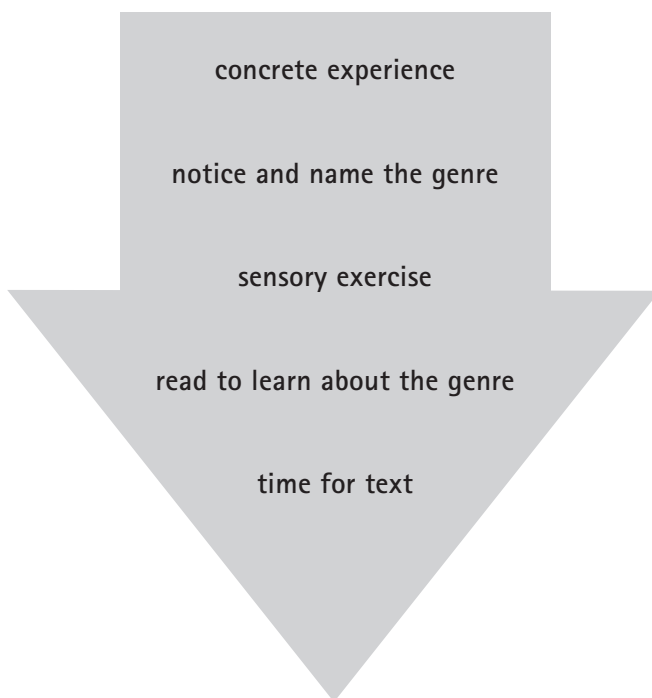
The How

How do we take an abstract concept like genre and make it accessible and interesting to our students? How can we pique their interest in types of text and move them into being readers and writers of multiple genres? The launching sequence from *Comprehension Connections*, which ushers our students into an understanding of the thinking strategies, can help us here. As I state on pages four and five: “I didn’t set out to create a formulaic path to follow for the launching of a strategy, but upon reflection, I discovered some instructional patterns had emerged. This launching sequence was born from trial and error and a lot of talk with teachers.”

With the use of concrete objects, art, music, and short samples of text, we can launch a genre study or simply acquaint students with a genre’s personality. And along the way, we’ll allow for plenty of time for talk. It’s fair to say that these ideas shape my thinking when planning to teach any abstract topic or concept, whether it be genres, thinking strategies, social studies, or science concepts . . . you name it. Let’s define terms.

- **Launching sequence:** A progression for planning lessons that honors the gradual release of responsibility. This sequence allows time for teacher modeling, thinking aloud, and lots of talk. Kids acquire and practice the language of the genre, having fun along the way!
- **Concrete experience:** An initial exposure to a genre, a lesson with a concrete focus. Connections are easily made, creating bridges of thinking from the known to the new. Concrete lessons anchor future thinking.
- **Notice and name the genre:** A time for students to inquire and explore with the genre.

LAUNCHING SEQUENCE



- **Sensory exercise:** A lesson that links the concrete experience to new thinking, providing opportunities to learn through music and art.
- **Read to learn about the genre:** An experience where students learn about the genre from the genre.
- **Quotations to get kids talking:** A thought-provoking collection of quotations from authors, artists, musicians, and other great thinkers that spurs our students to consider the power of genres beyond the walls of the classroom.
- **Time for text:** A bibliography of resources for teachers who have enjoyed the launching sequence and are ready to guide their students into exploration of a genre.

The launching sequence has breathed new life into my teaching and has made learning more incremental and accessible for my students. When I step back and take a broader look, I realize it is powered by the use of metaphor. I wholeheartedly agree with Rick Wormelli, author of *Metaphors and Analogies: Power Tools for Teaching Any Subject* (Stenhouse, 2009): “There is nothing in the K–12 curriculum that is so symbolic or abstract that we could not create a physical comparison that would sharpen students’ understanding.” As you’ll see, I compare poetry to a jar, historical fiction to a clothespin, and autobiography to a mirror, just to name a few. I’ve seen the abstract concepts of genre come alive for students when I tap into the limitless influence of metaphor.

Each part of the launching sequence is important, but let’s zoom in on the two steps where metaphor fuels the capacity for deeper understanding: the concrete experience and the sensory exercise.

The Concrete Experience: Make It Real

“The more interesting, intense, and concrete the experiences accessed or built through frontloading, the better for the reader.”

—Jeffrey Wilhelm

If my pastor introduces a sermon with a concrete object, I am more likely to listen intently and then, later in the week, think about the sermon and its application to my life. Recently when I entered the sanctuary to my church, I noticed a weightlifting

bench and some free weights sitting on the stage. I was instantly curious about how these objects would connect with the theme of the church service and I began making inferences. Thanks to a few concrete objects, I was thinking about the sermon before it even started. Days later, I found myself thinking about how resistance can make us stronger. My pastor would be proud. His instructional design worked.

I'm not the only one who responds openly and instantly to concrete lessons. Time and time again I've seen it happen with my students, from preschool to high school, and in professional development sessions with teachers, too. In *Made to Stick* (Random House, 2007), authors Chip and Dan Heath say that of all the ways we can try to make learning long-lasting, "concreteness is perhaps the easiest to embrace." It works. And not just for the kids who are reading well and seem to learn everything with ease. It also works for kids who are struggling in reading, who do not usually respond to abstract concepts, texts, and mundane paper/pencil tasks. Our students who are learning English can easily latch on to these concrete launching lessons, as well. Objects from everyday life, with no text attached, level the playing field and allow for valuable thinking time for everyone in the room. The Heath brothers go on to say, "Language is often abstract, but *life* is not abstract." And later, in their chapter titled "Concreteness": "Abstraction makes it harder to understand an idea and to remember it. It also makes it harder to coordinate our activities with others, who may interpret the abstraction in very different ways. Concreteness helps us avoid these problems."

In her 2008 *Educational Leadership* article, "The Object of Their Attention," Dr. Shari Tishman from Harvard's Project Zero builds a case for concrete objects. Tishman states:

Concrete objects are also engaging and accessible, especially in a group setting. You'll find that once students start generating observations and ideas about an object, it's hard to get them to stop. This is because looking carefully at something and trying to discern its features is a form of cognition with an intrinsically rewarding feedback loop. The more you look, the more you see; the more you see, the more interesting the object becomes. Moreover, examining objects directly—either visually, tactually, or aurally—is something most students can do. Regardless of background knowledge, learning style, or skill, almost all students can notice features of an object, ask questions about it, and generate ideas and connections. Students' responses may differ, but these differences contribute to the conversation rather than detract from it.

One of the most powerful parts of the launching sequence is the concrete experience. When I plan for instruction (and I'm not necessarily talking about sitting at a desk when I'm planning . . . it's more often when I'm driving or walking or putting away laundry), I look for creative ways to use objects to maximize engagement and understanding.

The Sensory Exercise: Come to Understand Through Art and Music

Art and music. Sometimes nothing else will do.

It's like when the doors to your house are locked and you can't find your keys. You have to search for other ways to get inside, ways that you might not have considered before, ways that might not be as easy or as comfortable. That's what art and music can do. They provide another way to understand the abstract, a pathway that is pleasurable and metacognitive all at once. Now after more than two decades of building my instructional repertoire, I turn to art and music without delay instead of saving them for my last resort. With some students, I can teach and reteach all day long, but unless I provide a sensory exercise, comprehension is elusive. My students need the images and melodies to intercede, speaking a language that everyone understands. Consider these words from Elliot Eisner and Arthur Costa.

"The arts also teach that neither words nor numbers define the limits of our cognition; we know more than we can tell. There are many experiences and a multitude of occasions in which we need art forms to say what literal language cannot say."

**—Elliot W. Eisner, emeritus professor of art and education
at Stanford University School of Education**

"All information gets to the brain through our sensory channels—our tactile, gustatory, olfactory, visual, kinesthetic, and auditory senses. Those whose sensory pathways are open, alert, and acute absorb more information from the environment than those whose pathways are withered, immune, and oblivious to sensory stimuli. It is proposed, therefore, that aesthetics is an essential element of

thinking skills programs. Cognitive education should include the development of sensory acumen.”

—Arthur L. Costa, emeritus professor of education
at California State University Sacramento

Using art and music is not an option; it's a necessity. If I tackle an abstract concept, unit, or chapter and neglect to look through the lens of art and music, I am sure to leave some students behind.

In the chapters to follow you'll meet (or become reacquainted with) artists like Joseph Cornell and his Cornell Box. You'll listen to singer/songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter and discover the historical content of her lyrics. Along with each new genre of writing, new genres of art and music are introduced, just waiting to be enjoyed. And that's an added benefit of sprinkling in art and music as you introduce students to genre: enjoyment. The arts inspire new thinking while providing simple, essential enjoyment.

*“And while a hundred civilizations have prospered
(sometimes for centuries) without computers or windmills or even
the wheel, none have survived even a few generations without art.”*

—David Bayles and Ted Orland

As I said before, sometimes nothing else will do.

As You Begin

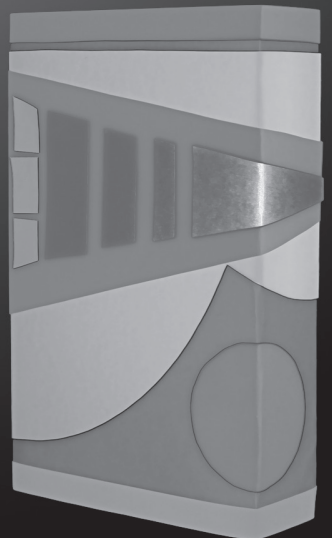
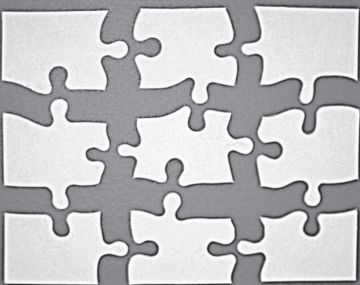
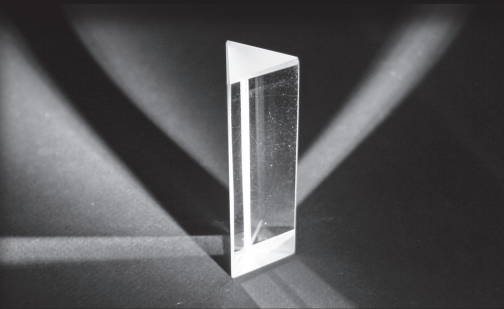
I'm honored when teachers ask me to sign their books or to visit their classrooms. But the greatest satisfaction comes when a teacher takes one of my ideas and shapes it to better meet the needs of her students. This book is simply a collection of ideas organized around a launching framework. It is designed to be used as a starting point for the many more ideas you'll have as a result of reading.

*“Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle
them, and pretty soon you have a dozen.”*

—John Steinbeck

Let the breeding begin!

seeds



Poetry

A Match Made in Heaven

“The crown of literature is poetry. It is its end and aim. It is the sublimest activity of the human mind. It is the achievement of beauty and delicacy. The writer of prose can only step aside when the poet passes.”

—W. Somerset Maugham

ANSWER: Mirtie Spaw (1904–1991), my maternal grandmother

QUESTION: Why does Tanny love the rhyme and rhythm of language?



My grandmother loved poems, beautiful collections of rhyming words that told of her Appalachian heritage and of her faith. We would sit in the porch swing at her old white farmhouse and she would recite children’s rhymes and sing traditional hymns to me. I loved the feel of her wrinkled hand in mine, the breeze in my face from the pace of the swing, and the sweet rhythmic words in my ears. Forty years later, I still remember my favorite:

*“Come little leaves,” said the Wind one day,
“Come o’er the meadows with me and play,
Put on your dresses of red and gold,
For summer is gone and the days grow cold.”*

—George Cooper, American poet

ANSWER: Mrs. Yates, my seventh-grade language arts teacher

QUESTION: Why does Tanny love to read and write poetry?

My seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Yates, told me that she loved reading my poetry. She knew I was miserably shy, so she always praised me in writing or in a hushed voice. She commented in my writer's journal that I should consider submitting a particular one of my poems to a children's poetry magazine. One day she leaned over my shoulder during class and placed a postage stamp on my desk. She smiled at me and whispered, "Don't forget to send in that poem." With her stamp, I sent it in. It was published. Twenty-five dollars arrived in the mail. That money was worth nothing compared to the exhilaration of seeing myself in print.

Yes, this is a simplistic way of looking at it, I know. Of course there were many influences from my childhood that shaped my likes and dislikes, encouraged my talents and exaggerated my insecurities. But, like many kids, I was highly sensitive to the words and deeds of my teachers. One encouraging comment sent my confidence soaring. One sharp criticism injected me with lasting self-doubt.

I consider myself lucky. I have positive recollections of experiencing poetry as a child. As you might have noticed, these memories are tied directly to people in my life. Poetry is like that. It is the connecting of one soul to another: the poet to the reader, the teacher to the student, the student to the teacher, and the poet to self.

Do you want your students to love poetry? There's a lot you can do to make it happen. Teaching poetry is like matchmaking. If we want our students to fall in love with poetry, to get high from reading and writing it, we must create experiences where positive emotions run strong and judgment is absent. We must show the

real side of ourselves, and be relaxed, open, and honest. Sometimes our stress levels run so high for so long that our students go for weeks without seeing this side of us. They'll remember these lessons where you didn't seem rushed and it was obvious that you loved what you were teaching. It's matchmaking: you know your students and poetry would be wonderful together, so you've just got to set them up on some instructional "dates."

Note: Maybe you don't love poetry yourself. Maybe positive poetry experiences never happened for you. That's okay. Perhaps you can use this launching sequence to do a little matchmaking for yourself!



Fig. 2-1 Granny Spaw's porch swing

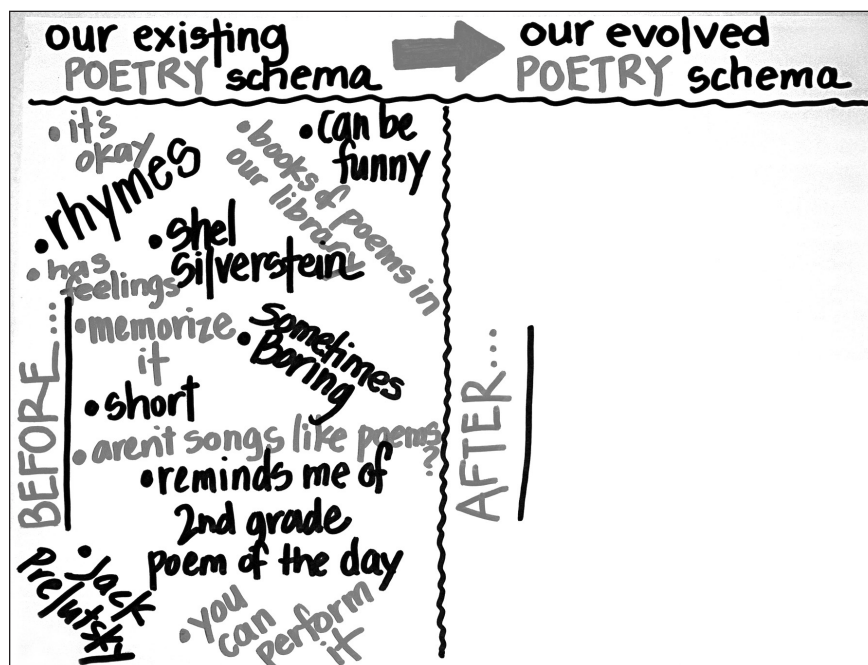


Fig. 2-2 Student thinking before the launching sequence

I like to take a few minutes to see where my students stand when it comes to poetry. Using a large T-chart, I do a “One-Minute Schema Determiner” (see pages 33–36 in *Comprehension Connections: Bridges to Strategic Reading*, Heinemann, 2007). I jot down their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and opinions about poetry on one side of the T in a particular color. Days later, after teaching the lessons mentioned in this chapter, I revisit the chart. Using another color, I fill in the opposite side of the T with the new thinking my students have generated about the genre of poetry. It’s good for me to know where the kids are coming from, and good for them to see how their thinking changes after learning and talking together.

Sometimes intermediate kids tell me how poetry bores them. And not just boys, either. There’s nothing I hate to hear more. My fifteen-year-old daughter Brynne, who has been talking through this chapter with me as I write, says that sometimes poetry is taught in a way that is nothing but drudgery. Brynne says that kids need *poetry resuscitation* more than they need *poetry recitation*. I agree. For most kids, just one, no-strings-attached, honest experience with poetry can bring them into a relationship with this special genre. They say it’s never too late to change your mind, and that’s certainly true here. It’s never too late for you to help change their minds about poetry . . . or more accurately, change their hearts. Let this launching sequence be your guide.

Launching Sequence: Poetry

Concrete Experience: The Poetry Jar



I begin by pulling the students up close and personal, expressing my complete fascination with this new genre we're about to explore. I typically begin with the stories I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, stories about my grandmother Mirtie and my middle school teacher, Mrs. Yates. I explain that because these important people in my life loved poetry, I started feeling connected to this genre, too.

I know I can't go wrong by starting with story. In *Made to Stick* (Random House, 2007), Chip and Dan Heath teach us that a story is powerful in two important ways. It *simulates* and *inspires*. Stories allow our students to simulate real-life scenarios. When we tell a story, it gives our students ideas about possible ways to act and think, allowing them to reflect on ways they would act and think in a similar situation, sort of like a "life rehearsal." Stories are also inspirational to our students. They motivate our kids to do something with what they've heard, to take action. Through my stories, I want my students to imagine poetry as part of their lives and to consider poetry as part of their reading/writing diet.

In *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers also discuss the concrete approach to thinking and learning, as mentioned earlier in this book. This poetry launch is a blend of "story" and "concrete."

The concrete object I use to launch this genre is a container of some kind. Mostly I use a glass jar, but I've used a Tupperware bowl, a Thermos®, and a Ziploc® bag on occasion.

I begin with a simple question: "How is poetry like a jar?" I jot this on a piece of chart paper or project it on a screen, depending upon what is available to me. I place the container in a prominent place, with the students up close around me. Asking the kids to turn and talk, to make this idea thinking-intensive, they are given time to explore the question. Some kids understand the metaphor right away, while others listen in and learn from their peers. No surprise here: their responses correlate directly with the kind of exposure and experience they've had with poetry in the past. I don't really comment here, or give affirmations. I just listen.

After a minute or two, I say to students, "Hold on to that thinking. We'll come back to it in a moment. If you are feeling unsure about how poetry can be like a jar, don't worry. Your thinking has had a good start and it will get deeper as we

work and talk together. Right now I want to tell you about my dad. I will use this story to show you how poetry can be different from other genres, and how it can be like a jar. My dad is one of the most special people in my life and always has been. I can tell you about him in two ways: with my head, and with my heart.”

With my head:

- My dad’s name is Bob.
- He used to work at General Electric in Ohio but now he is retired and lives in Florida.
- My dad reads the newspaper every morning.
- He plays golf once a week.
- Every evening, Dad drinks Diet Coke® and eats potato chips.

With my heart:

- My dad has the kindest spirit of anyone I know.
- He speaks to everyone he meets.
- He treats everyone like a friend, even if he has never met the person before.
- Dad loves to take care of his family.
- I know he would do anything for me at any time.
- He loves me so much and has shown me in many ways all of my life.

By this time I am usually tearing up, but that makes the students all the more interested in the lesson. Hey, whatever it takes! I also want to be sensitive here, realizing that some of my students might not have a father like this in their lives. I tell them that they might be thinking of someone in their life who is like my dad is to me. Someone who cares about them. It could be a family member, a friend, a teacher or coach.

I ask, “What’s the difference between using your head and using your heart?” The students turn to each other and talk, and usually there is no shortage of ideas. Here are some recent responses from a fourth-grade classroom in Lancaster, Ohio:

- You just give facts when you use your head. You don’t really show your feelings.
- It’s like nonfiction when you use your head.



Fig. 2-3 Kayla holds the poetry jar

- When you use your heart you aren't afraid to say how you really feel. You take risks.
- Your heart says what's really important.

Without saying anything further, I hold the poetry jar in front of me. I jot down the heartfelt thoughts I have about my dad on little slips of paper, reading each one aloud again for the students to hear. I drop the papers into the jar.

Then I ask the kids to think about the initial metaphor that I used to introduce the genre, poetry as a container. Sometimes I am guilty of "leading kids along," providing too much too fast when it comes to "solving" a metaphor. I'm trying to back off, give more wait time, and allow them ample time to make meaning for themselves. The outcome is always richer when the kids decipher the metaphor on their own, anyway.

So I present the container, and simply ask, "How is a poem like a jar? Talk to your friends and think it through." The wonderful thing about turning and talking like this is that the kids bursting with thoughts don't have to hold it in any longer. And their peers are a willing audience. For those who don't yet have a clue about this container business, they get a chance to listen and learn from others, in language they are likely to understand.

How is poetry like a jar?

- It holds thoughts and feelings so you can pass them on to somebody else. (grade 6)
- Poems hold my heart. (grade 2)
- Poems can spill out of you like water from a container. (grade 5)
- My feelings need a place to go so I can put them in a poem. (grade 4)
- A poem is a jar of secret stuff I think about. (grade 1)
- It is a jar of thinking. (kindergarten)

It's fulfilling to hear kids share this abstract, representational thinking . . . all derived from a simple, guided, concrete experience. But don't stop there. Now that your students get the idea about how this genre can be compared to an everyday object, allow them the opportunity to take their thinking even deeper with the following questions:

- How is writing poetry like giving blood?
- How is reading poetry like looking at an X-ray?
- How is experiencing poetry like being a daredevil?

In each case, present the students with an image to jump-start their thinking. Given time to think and talk, your students are sure to amaze themselves (and you!) as they explore this genre through a metaphorical lens. Here are some thought-provoking metaphors from my friend Mary's fifth-grade classroom:

GRETA: Poetry is a blender. The kitchen kind blends foods and a poem blends feelings.

ANSON: Poetry is a healing wound. When you have a physical and mental wound it is painful to have it reopen. When you write poetry, sometimes it is the same way. It can be painful to transfer your feeling into words.

SAMMIE: A snake twists and turns like a poem moves and grooves with feeling.

NICK: Poetry is like a vacuum cleaner. A vacuum sucks in dirt, and a poem sucks in you!

Here are a few quotations that encourage the same kind of thinking, comparing poets and poems to unlikely counterparts.

*"Poets are like magicians, searching for magical phrases
to pull rabbits out of people's souls."*

—Terri Guillemets

*"Poetry is ordinary language raised to the nth power.
Poetry is boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions,
all held together by the delicate, tough skin of words."*

—Paul Engle

"Poetry is a packsack of invisible keepsakes."

—Carl Sandburg

Even though this genre can be among the most abstract to interpret, it is among the easiest to make concrete. A concrete launch of poetry with students is one of those lessons I put in the "never fail" category, although maybe that category doesn't actually exist in instruction. I use this concrete experience to help kids notice and name the genre and to share my fondness for it with them.

Just doing a little matchmaking.

Noticing and Naming the Genre on Their Own

After the launching lesson, students are beginning to understand how this genre is special, how it holds our thoughts and feelings, how it connects with us not just as readers and writers, but as human beings. I want to be sure, however, that students have a chance to notice and name this genre on their own, discovering its unusual characteristics through observation and conversation. I was recently reminded how important this is when a fifth-grade girl told me she really hadn't read or written much poetry in her school career. We can't take it for granted that our students have a solid foundation in this genre.

I compile a small collection of random poems and distribute them to partners or small groups. Deliberately, I don't provide too much guidance for this exploration. I simply ask the kids to spend some time with this mini-collection of poetry and do some detective work. Of course they can read and enjoy the poems along the way, but the guiding question for this discovery is, "What do you notice about the genre of poetry?"

Note: The small collection I provide for this exercise reminds me of the old wedding rhyme, *Something Old, Something New*. I include: something old, something new, something short, something long, something funny, something sad, something traditional, something that ignores the rules of capitalization and punctuation, something written in verses or stanzas, something written in a shape, etc.

My students seem to love this relaxed time for "uncovery." And I love to watch the process. Some groups choose to jot down their observations on sticky notes, while others enter information into a computer. However kids choose to track their thinking is fine with me as long as the process is steeped in conversation.

After a time, we come back together in whole group. A chart serves as the holder for our collective observations about what poetry can be and do. Ownership of the content of this chart runs strong. And all I had to do was give the kids a purpose and some time. Why is that sometimes so hard to do . . . when I know that the results are always so worth it?

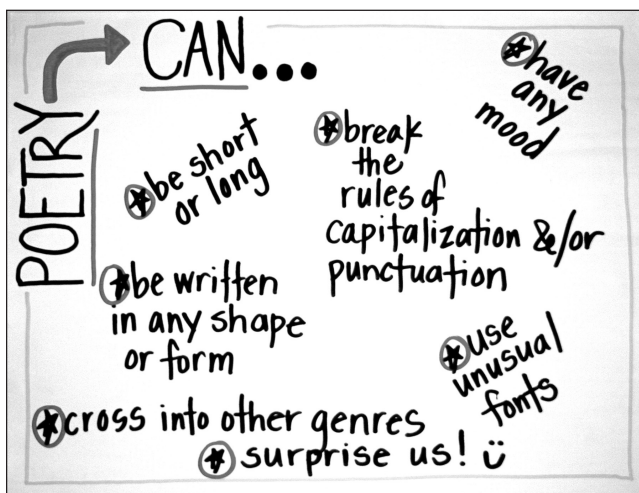


Fig. 2-4 What students noticed during poetry “uncovery” time

Sensory Exercises: Poetry

Music Connection: Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996)

Pearl Bailey once said that Ella Fitzgerald is simply the greatest singer of them all. And people all over the world agreed, earning her the nicknames “The First Lady of Song” and “The Queen of Scat.” Ella won thirteen Grammy Awards and sold over 40 million albums.

Ella’s voice is thought of as poetry in motion, with feeling taking over where convention leaves off. One form of vocal jazz that Ella perfected was scat singing. Ella left behind the lyrics on the page and sang nonsense words along to the rhythm. Many agree that trumpeter Louis Armstrong invented scat singing, but Ella Fitzgerald brought it to life, popularizing scat singing in the 1940s. I tell kids that when listening to Ella sing scat-style, you can almost tell when her singing moves from her head to her heart. Scat is like poetry, in that it gives a person a way to express herself without conventions getting in the way.

For a sensory experience that helps students make connections to the genre of poetry, introduce your students to Ella Fitzgerald. Listen to her ignore the confines of language while she scats.

Scat is using your voice to sing with nonsense syllables or without words at all. The singer improvises, or creates melodies and rhythms without the limits of the conventions of language. Scat singers use their voices to play solos, just like a trumpet player or clarinetist might do.

- “Blue Skies” (1958 stereo version) Ella Fitzgerald
- “How High the Moon” (live version, 1960 West Berlin) Ella Fitzgerald
- “Smooth Sailing” (1951 version) Ella Fitzgerald

Share photographs of her, show her album covers (available free at Google images or Bing), and read picture books about her life and style of music.

Fitzgerald, Ella. *A-Tisket, A-Tasket*. New York: Philomel, 2003.

Orgill, Roxanne. *Skit-Scat Raggedy Cat*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2010 .

Pinkney, Andrea. *Ella Fitzgerald*. New York: Hyperion, 2002.

Weinstein, Muriel. *When Louis Armstrong Taught Me Scat*. San Francisco: Chronicle, 2008.

Share some of Ella’s own words, and react together.

“I sing like I feel.”

“The only thing better than singing is more singing.”

“Just don’t give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don’t think you can go wrong.”

“It isn’t where you came from; it’s where you’re going that counts.”

Facilitate a conversation about the similarities between the genre of poetry and Ella’s musical style, emphasizing how she made her own kind of music with her heart leading the way.

Art Connection: Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

American artist Robert Rauschenberg is known for ignoring the conventional. He reshaped and redefined everything he touched. For decades, people have tried to categorize Rauschenberg’s work: Is it painting or sculpture? Is it photography or printmaking? He said that his work filled in the gap between art and life.

Share Rauschenberg’s work with your students. I especially like to share his *Combines* (1953–1964), where he took found objects and trash and merged them into his paintings, thus blurring the lines of the expected and traditional. He saw beauty in Coke bottles, soap dishes, and mirrors; he regarded them as everyday art that many people never notice.

Here are some pieces to look for:

- *Coca Cola Plan* (1958)
- *First Landing Jump* (1961)
- *Monogram* (1955–1959)
- *Pilgrim* (1950)
- *Satellite* (1955)
- *Untitled: Man with White Shoes* (1954)

There are many similarities between Robert Rauschenberg’s creative approach and the genre of poetry. After taking some time to view some of the *Combines*, present these comments about Rauschenberg and his work. Ask your students: How was Rauschenberg like a poet? Here are some discussion starters.

- Rauschenberg took everyday items from real life and made you think about them in new ways. He gave new meaning to things.
- Rauschenberg didn’t believe you had to stick to one way of doing things. When creating art, he broke the “rules” that others told him he should follow.
- Rauschenberg was an inventor.
- Rauschenberg improvised, making things up as he went along.
- Rauschenberg realized that not everyone would completely understand him.
- Rauschenberg always wanted to go beyond the limitations that others set for him.

Read to Learn More About the Genre

- Creech, Sharon. *Love That Dog*. Scholastic: New York, 2003.

This is a story about a boy named Jack and his dog, Sky. But it’s really a story about words, how words give us a way to make relationships in life. And in the end, a poem saves the day, giving Jack the vehicle he needs to let his heart do the talking. In *Love That Dog*, readers learn so much about the genre of poetry, sometimes without even realizing it. Read aloud in the context of this genre launch, however, this heart-wrenching story can help you and your students grow your poetry schema.

Quotations About Poetry to Get Kids Talking

Find a couple of quotations from this collection that your students will enjoy thinking about. I tried to limit the number of quotes in this list, but there are just too many great ideas. I couldn't let go of a single one!

"I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy . . . in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry and music."

—John Adams

"Poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty in words."

—Edgar Allan Poe

"Breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry."

—Muriel Rukeyser

"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for."

—Dead Poets Society

"Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

—T. S. Eliot

"Poetry is all that is worth remembering in life."

—William Hazlitt

"Poetry is thoughts that breathe, and words that burn."

—Thomas Gray

"You can't write poetry on the computer."

—Quentin Tarantino

*“Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has,
it may be inadvisable to draw it out . . .
Perfect understanding will sometimes
almost extinguish pleasure.”*

—A. E. Housman

*“Poetry is a deal of joy and pain and wonder,
with a dash of the dictionary.”*

—Kahlil Gibran

*“Poetry is just the evidence of life.
If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash.”*

—Leonard Cohen

*“A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong,
a homesickness, a lovesickness.”*

—Robert Frost

*“A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately
in love with language.”*

—W. H. Auden

*“A poet’s work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds,
to take sides, start arguments, shape the world,
and stop it going to sleep.”*

—Salman Rushdie

“Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.”

—Robert Frost

“Poetry: the best words in the best order.”

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

*“In poetry, you must love the words,
the ideas and the images and rhythms
with all your capacity to love anything at all.”*

—Wallace Stevens

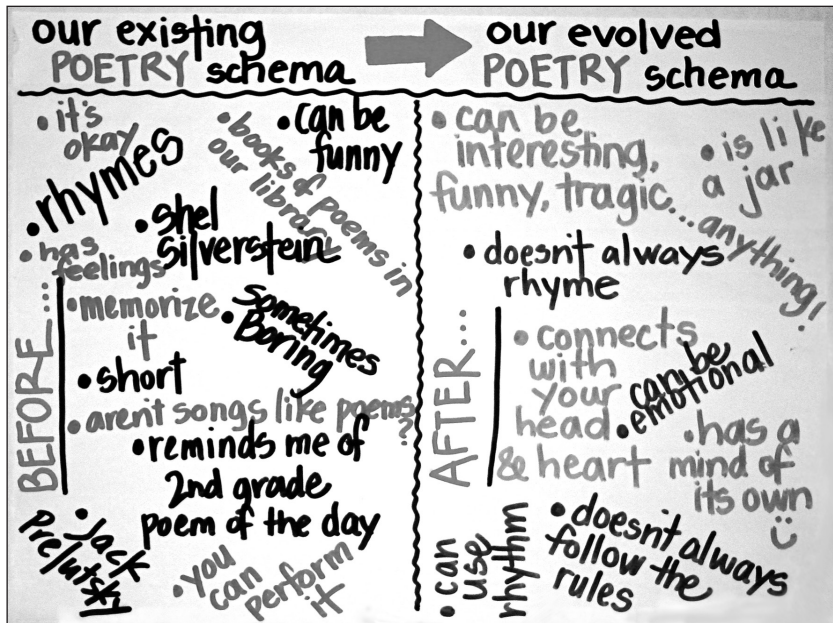


Fig. 2-5 Student thinking after the launching sequence

Time for Text: Poetry

Now that your students have a deeper understanding of what this genre is all about, investigate some of the amazing ideas that are available to guide your lesson design!

- Barton, Bob, and David Booth. 2003. *Poetry Goes to School*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Flynn, Nick, and Shirley McPhillips. 2000. *A Note Slipped Under the Door*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Heard, Georgia, and Lester Laminack. 2007. *Climb Inside a Poem*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Holbrook, Sara. 2005. *Practical Poetry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Moore, Bill, and David Booth. 2003. *Poems, Please: Sharing Poetry with Children*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Janeczko, Paul. 2011. *Reading Poetry in the Middle Grades*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Pinnell, Gay Su, and Irene Fountas. 2003. *Sing a Song of Poetry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Robb, Laura, and J. Patrick Lewis. 2007. *Poems for Teaching in the Content Areas*. New York: Scholastic.
- Salinger, Michael, and Sara Holbrook. 2006. *Outspoken!* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Tannenbaum, Judith. *Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes*. 2000. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

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