

Excerpt from *Conversations with a Poet: Inviting Poetry into K-12 Classrooms*  
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## INTRODUCTION

I have been writing poetry, in collections and in picture books, for twenty-five years, and I have been publishing poetry written by teenagers since the year 2000. I feel that every year my own poetry improves. One of the reasons it improves is that I write every day. Another is that I read many other poets. I also learn from a friend and professor of English, Maria Damon, who teaches me about poetry when she reacts to the poems I write and when we write books together. To further strengthen my writing, I get feedback from my writing group of fellow children's-book writers who meet with me every month, and I take classes in poetry at a nearby university as often as possible.

I wrote this guidebook to help you in your teaching of poetry and to support your students' poetry writing and your own. My intent is to show how to adapt the creative processes of practicing poets to the classroom setting and to add to your knowledge of poetry and the poetry forms. My hope is that it will encourage you to teach poetry all year long, instead of saving it for April, National Poetry Month.

### HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The book is divided into two sections. Section I is a frank discussion of writing and teaching poetry from a poet's point of view. It gives you inside information that is not always included in educational books. This section provides a philosophical foundation and a practical set of ideas for teaching poetry. Section II specifically targets sixteen different poetry forms. In each chapter, I unpack a form and provide sample poems and bibliographical citations as models.

Section I begins with a rationale for teaching poetry and for teaching the poetry forms, in particular, to bolster your resolve to teach poetry throughout the year. I've also enumerated my reasons for choosing the poetry forms included in the book. The next chapters in Section I explain the nuts and bolts—the elements of poetry and how to read and discuss poetry with students. The last chapters of this section are intended to help you and your students through the exciting process of teaching and writing in the poetry forms. These chapters include practical suggestions and support for teacher demonstrations and ideas for jump-starting creativity. They also present a model for "revision as experimentation" and give a variety of suggestions for publishing and presenting student poetry.

Throughout Section I, I have included the voices of my poet friends, ranging from outstanding poets who are recent college graduates to renowned chil-

dren's poets. My purpose is for you to see that everyone has a different process, as your students will, and to let you in on the inner thoughts of practicing poets. I also provided biographies of these poets at the back of the book so that students would understand that there is no stereotypical poet—that they, too, can be poets, regardless of their interests or personalities.

Section II thoroughly explains the poetry forms, which are in alphabetical order. Every chapter includes historical background, characteristics of the form, and "What This Form Offers." This latter portion specifies the benefits of teaching each form and shows how to meet objectives of current standards. To make a link to children's lives, I've listed everyday parallels of the poetry forms as well. The chart on page 52 provides a list of the forms from most accessible to most complicated. The first page of every poetry form also indicates suggested grade levels.

After the first informational pages in Section II, you will find sample poems at your fingertips. These samples include a primary poem for grades K-2, an intermediate poem for grades 3-5, and a middle school/high school poem for grades 6-12, when appropriate. For example, the samples for the sonnet are only for grades 9-12. However, when you read my poems, you will see that many more of the poetry forms are appropriate for elementary school children than you might expect. Having had teaching experience in grades K-12, in some capacity, and by visiting classrooms every day, I have been able to keep each age group in my mind's eye while writing the poems in this book.

For each poetry form, I included a writing demonstration (what I call a "think-through") that reveals my thinking as I wrote one of the sample poems.

Bibliographies of books and Internet sites where additional sample poems can be found are located at the end of each form. While compiling these extensive bibliographies, my purpose was to provide a varied body of poetry—classical, diverse, fun, serious. I also made an effort to cite a wide range of poems, from easily accessible poems to avant-garde poetry, that will push the envelope for your students.

## **HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

*Conversations with a Poet* can be used in a variety of ways. Depending on your comfort level with poetry, you can pick and choose from the chapters in Section I, which are meant to provide inspiration, background, and practical suggestions for teaching the poetry forms.

In Section II, the poetry forms are arranged in alphabetical order, but a chart on page 52 lists them from most accessible to most complicated. One very workable option is to teach them in order of accessibility, teaching one approximately every two weeks. Of course, you might feel more comfortable starting with the forms you are familiar with and moving on to the new ones. Or you could stimulate your students by starting with forms that neither of you has ever explored. These might include visual poems, found poems, and sestinas.

Another approach is to tie the forms to the curriculum. For example, students could write ballads or persona poems that relate to American history. Blues

poems could fit into a study of the Civil War, slavery, or civil rights. Students could write free verse or cinquains about the poetic aspects of scientific subjects such as metamorphosis or cloud formations. You could use the beats and the syllables in limericks and haiku, or the patterns in a sestina, as part of a math lesson. If conflicts arise in the classroom, you could use multi-voice poems to brainstorm solutions. Free verse could be an ongoing part of daily journaling.

Although this text implies that students will be writing their own poetry for all forms, you might only study the structure and the sample poems for some of the forms. For others, student writing may be the main event. For instance, intermediate students might appreciate the sestina about the dog at the beach, but they probably wouldn't write one of their own. Similarly, kindergartners enjoy limericks, and some of the samples are meant for them, but they probably won't write any of their own. On the other hand, some of the forms that might be out of reach for individuals can be fun to write cooperatively as a class. Kindergartners might write a list poem together about what they like to do with their friends. Intermediate students could write a renga as a class.

In general, the informational pages for each form in Section II can be your backup when introducing each poetry form to students. The sample poems form a handy mini-anthology of model poems to jump-start student writing. The bibliographies are meant to expand on my sample poems because I have a particular style, and students need to be exposed to a wide variety of diverse poetry and poets.

There are several ways in which Sections I and II can be used in tandem. Specific pages in Section I will be helpful when students are in the workshopping stages or the revision/experimentation stages. (See pages 37-38 for possible ways of workshopping a poem, and pages 34-36 for ideas on revising.) If you want to teach specific elements of poetry writing such as line breaks, you can use Chapter 3 in Section I for backup. Finally, when it comes to publishing or presenting student poems, you can refer back to Chapter 9.

Another way to use Sections I and II together relates to the poets quoted throughout Section 1. I purposely included these poets in the bibliographies, and their biographies are in alphabetical order at the back of the book. The quotes, poems, and biographies can be used together to study a particular poet's unique style. For easy access, the index includes each poet's name.

## **RESOURCES IN THIS BOOK**

I've been a classroom teacher, so I know how little time teachers have. Now that I'm a writer, I have time to write the books I wish I'd had as a teacher. In this book I offer some time-saving ideas.

### **Demonstrations**

In Section II, I call my demonstrations "Think-throughs." There are 16 demonstrations at your fingertips that can be used with your students and that can serve as models for your own demonstrations. I showed my thinking and strategies as I wrote one of the sample poems for each poetry form. These demonstrations

show how I revise, or what I call "experiment," from first draft to last. In addition, I wrote brief notes for each sample poem, pointing out such things as poetic elements and strategies I used.

### **Teaching Schedules**

On pages 48-49, you will find three different scheduling possibilities that show how to include poetry when you are planning your instructional week.

### **Poetry Forms Chart**

The chart on page 52 shows the forms in what I see as a teachable order, beginning with the list poem, the form I consider easiest, and ending with the sestina, a more challenging form. The chart also shows which forms I recommend for different grade levels. Obviously, you can pick and choose and rearrange.

### **Bibliographies**

With diversity in mind, I researched and included an extensive bibliography that appears at the end of each poetry form in Section II. A number of citations are online because the Internet is a very accessible source of poetry. Any poem or author mentioned in the text is included in the bibliography. Page references are cited in the chapters to make it easier for you to find the bibliographic information.

### **Student Handouts**

I wrote all the chapters in Section I in such a way that they could be shared with students verbatim. Particularly, the charts and questions in Chapter 7 on revision/experimentation, the read-throughs on pages 18-22, and the workshopping questions in chapter 7 can be handed to students at appropriate grade levels. In Section II, the sample poems for each poetry form, available at different grade levels, can be photocopied for student use, along with the "think-through" for each of the 16 poetry forms.

### **Poet Biographies**

All the poets who are quoted in this book or whose poetry is reproduced in this book are part of the "Poet Biographies" section. I elicited these quotes from a diverse group of poets.

### **Glossary**

The glossary is annotated with examples to clarify some of the terms used in the book. Throughout the text I refer you to the glossary for further detail.

### **Poetry and Standards**

Many teachers worry that there isn't enough time in the day to teach poetry. In Section II, for every poetry form I included a section called "What This Form Offers," in which I listed the benefits of each form, as they relate to learning standards. You might be surprised to find out how many of the standards can be met through poetry writing, besides the ones you would expect, such as

introducing conventional poetry forms and understanding terms such as *metaphor* and *simile*. For example, the acrostic and sestina offer opportunities for logical thinking. The sonnet is about presenting a hypothesis and coming to conclusions. The list poem encourages students to think about sequencing. The diamante provides an opportunity to emphasize parts of speech. Students will be writing persuasively and descriptively in odes. In general, students will be interpreting and synthesizing the meaning of poems, comparing and contrasting different forms of poetry, and practicing fluency by reading poems aloud, particularly their own. They will be learning the stages of the writing process, from brainstorming to a final draft, and reading notable literary selections. Many curricular tie-ins-ways to use poetry to enrich the basic curriculum-exist. A number of these curricular ideas are listed on page xi.

## **AN INVITATION**

It's time to start. Pull up a chair and let's talk about poetry in a different way the way poets do. I'll show you an approach to poetry that will make teaching, reading, and writing poems a fun, inspiring, and relevant part of your day and your students' day, while meeting the requirements of learning standards at the same time. This approach is one that will impact lives, that will encourage your students to discover who they are as individuals, and will encourage them to "tell their stories." This approach will invite you to do the same.

