

Verb-Portrait Poems

Students of all ages sometimes want to write poems to and/or about someone they love: a family member, a friend, or a pet. I am often asked by teachers if I would present an idea for a gift kind of poem around holidays like Mother's or Father's Day, Valentine's Day, or birthdays. Without specific guidelines, and due to the sentiment inherent in writing about a loved one, these poems can often turn out to sound like sugary greeting card verse. The following structure can enable students to write a poem which captures a multi-layered portrait of someone in terms of their actions, gestures, habits, interests, personality, temperament, etc.

1) Direct students in choosing a person they know well to write about. Have them write the person's name as the title, at least for now. Tell them they will be writing a poem about the person, starting each line with a verb that creates a picture and feeling of what the person is like. Tell them that starting each line with a verb followed by descriptive details keeps the poem building pictures and feelings of the subject and prevents a falling-into-a-story approach.

2) Pass out the verb list. The list might help them get started with a verb that connects with the person, or it might give them an opportunity to use an uncommon verb they otherwise would not have used.

3) Write "My Teacher" on the board as a title for a warm up. Ask them for suggestions for verbs naming things you do. Tell them to avoid the obvious, such as "teaches us lots of subjects," etc. What do they know about your interests? (*kayaks* in the San Juan Islands/*plants* primroses in the kitchen window boxes, etc.) Write pertinent lines under the title. Underline the verb at the beginning of each line to emphasize the structure. Use the verb list for another sample line. Point out a word such as "deliver." Ask them to think of a line about you that could start with this word that we most often associate with mail carriers: (*delivers* new ideas about writing techniques).

4) Choose one of the sample poems that would be a good model for your grade level. Project it on the screen, so students can see the structure. Read it aloud. Ask them which lines show that the writer observes the person closely. For example, in Sarah's "Mom" poem, it's evident that she's not only aware that her mom sketches, but she notices that she often sketches crows. The line, "dives into a mystery book when she's bored," indicates keen awareness: she recognizes when her mom is bored and not only tells us that she reads books, but notices she likes mysteries.

5) Give them about twenty to thirty minutes to write, and close with sharing.

Adaptations: This exercise is a good one for applying to other areas of the curriculum. The Vincent van Gogh poem is a collaboration by eighth graders studying the paintings and techniques of the artist. It can be applied to writing about a fictional character or historical figure, or used to write about an inanimate object for a science unit.

IDA

You peel skins gently from onions
wipe over the already clean counter
come to stay when mother is ill
erase dates from the backs of photographs
collect worn clothes to give at Christmas
stand in streets to watch the rain
hesitate to feed a plump child
utter opinions at gossip-filled newspapers
make a bed only with a blanket
frown on people who retire young
speak of war and innocent men lost
breathe quietly in your sleep
close a book marking a page
allow the phone to ring until it stops
knit sweaters that fit no one
knead dough with shaking hands
toss kittens out after they're born
burn pictures of your husband
who died and made you cry.

Carole, 11th grade

MOM

cooks delicious pastas for supper
fills my cat's bowl when I forget
prefers chocolate ice cream at Sugar Shack
helps me with my math homework
sketches crows in her notebook
dives into a mystery book when she's bored
wipes away my tears when I am sad

Sarah, 3rd grade

My Brother Matt

runs every morning with our dog, Einstein
drinks a quart of milk right out of the carton
puts empty cartons back in the fridge
polishes his Bronco before a date
tinkers with the engine every weekend
spends too much time in the bathroom
treats me to burgers at Barney's Grill
defends me when I get in trouble

Nick, 6th grade

Vincent van Gogh

dazzles my eyes with drooping sunflowers
sweeps whirlwinds of stars into the night
plants cypresses along a winding road
dots the sky with flaky clouds
sprinkles blossoming peach trees over a field
launches colorful boats onto the sea.

(Collaboration poem by Ms. Vaughn's 8th grade)