

## The Chain Poem, a Way of Breaking the Ice

*Most of us have heard the mantra from our students: "Poetry is boring." Writer and educator Ingrid Wendt doesn't accept this. Yes, there are boring poems. But poems are only boring, she says, when they fail to surprise. "Surprise me," she tells students. "Don't become another boring adult." In this description of the development of the "chain poem," she shows teachers how they can help their students avoid such a fate.*

### INGRID WENDT

*"Mr. Stafford," someone asked of the famous American poet, "When did you become a poet?"*

*"When did you stop?" he replied.*

Here are three poems written in response to the same assignment. All are first drafts; each was written in a classroom setting, in about ten minutes, by writers who had written few (if any) poems before. Each was written after less than half an hour of preparation by me, the visiting writer.

#### **Mirror**

*You can't keep your self-image  
abstaining from self-criticism.  
The vanity of life –  
actions without consequences!  
What's the reason for it all?*

—A teacher in Haltern, Germany

*As I look in the mirror  
I reflected about last night.  
I began to remember  
a thought that I came up with.*

*A joke came to mind.*

*It was making fun of someone  
or ridiculing them.*

*I decided to do away with that joke.*

—Todd B., Indian Hills Middle School,  
Sandy, Utah

*As I look in the mirror*

*I say it's morning*

*too early*

*way before sunrise*

*not time to think about running on a*

*beach*

*or the chattering seagulls*

*flying*

*like airplanes*

*soon to be hijacked.*

—Barb M., Newport High School,  
Newport, Oregon

What is this writing assignment? How can it be introduced in the classroom—not in a specially designated creative writing class, but in your average elementary, middle, or high school class that, like most classes, has had little previous

contact with poetry and may not like it?

The "chain poem" is one way to break the ice. I call my invention a chain poem, because it relies for its structure on a string of spontaneously generated words. I introduce this structure usually during the first part of a longer poetry unit. Writing chain poems gives nearly all students some measure of success, especially when they know in advance their words will not be graded, corrected, or criticized—for this is an experiment, after all, and who knows how it will turn out?

Writing a chain poem is an activity in stream of consciousness or free association. One idea links with the next, and the next, and the next. In writing chain poems, we practice thinking the way poets think, focusing, in the rough draft, more on process than product, trusting the unconscious mind to come up with its own internal, intuitive kind of logic, developing confidence that we can get past writer's block if we learn to relax and let ideas flow.

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## Setting the Tone

This is a warm-up activity. I tell the students what they write may turn out looking like a poem, or it may not—that's OK. What matters is that we wake up and encourage our poor, neglected, "right brains," from which metaphors and intuition come. I tell students, "Practice letting the mind wander. Daydream. Get credit for it. Discover that you can start with the same idea as everyone else, and your own unique creativity can shine through."

I make sure that students understand that poems, unlike correctly constructed prose paragraphs, sometimes begin with one idea and get, surprisingly, off the subject.

At about this point, someone will say, "Poetry is boring."

I respond, "Yes some poems are boring; it's true. But some people are boring. Why? Maybe some poems fail to surprise us. Maybe those people have forgotten how to be surprised." I tell my students, "Surprise me. Say something we don't expect—even if it doesn't make sense. Use your right brain, the place where the crazy ideas are. Don't let it dry up like a raisin. Don't become another boring adult."

This kind of talk is essential at first, freeing students from the obligation to be profound or entertaining, or from trying to "psych out" the teacher.

Sometimes the mechanics of writing get in the way of creativity. It helps to put the following "rules" on the board:

1) Don't plan in advance how the poem will end.

2) Write quickly—don't censor—include everything!

3) Don't rhyme, unless it's accidental

4) surkel werds yu kant spill

Explain, if necessary, that the mind goes faster than the pen, the typewriter, or the mouth. Capture on paper as much as



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possible. We can always take things away. Or add.

Rhyming poems are wonderful, but for now, let's use the words that come to us first. Let's not interrupt the flow by looking in the dictionaries. If we don't know how to spell something, let's circle it and find out later.

## Introducing the Activity

Now to the poem itself. The poem begins with a free association of words. I ask students what word comes to mind when they hear the word *party*. They brainstorm. I encourage many different answers. "Friends," maybe. Or "food," "games," "fun." "Politics." Sure, why not? Some answers (usually, not many) may bear no obvious connection at all. What if someone, hearing the word *party*, says "fence"? No matter. I tell young writers we trust them to offer only those words that,

in their minds, make genuine connections, however personal, however difficult to explain.

I then move this process into closeup. I pick out something in the room—a door, maybe. I ask, "What word does this remind you of? Maybe *paint* because your front door at home needs painting. Or the word *closed*." I encourage students to do some daydreaming. I hold up a piece of chalk. "You might be thinking about how chalk gets on your pants, and how you hate that. And that reminds you of how you got a stain on your shirt last night from spaghetti." Sometimes, these daydreams I create are kind of silly. That's good, too. The class needs to loosen up, to know that anything goes—within the boundaries of

good taste, of course. Poets often play with ideas, with words. That's part of the process, playing. Robert Frost said, "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom." Writing poems in the classroom is somewhat the same. Serious ideas often lurk behind silly ones. Let's take what comes.

I place the word *clock* on the board, up high. (Other good words to start with are *door*, *window*, *fence*, *light*, and of course just about any other noun.) I ask someone what word comes to mind when they think about the word *clock*. I write that word directly under the first word.

I encourage variety. If someone says "time," I ask what other words could have been used. There are no right answers and no wrong ones. I continue this way until I have a list of six to eight words—just a column of words down the center of the board. The last word will probably be a

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long distance in meaning from the first word. If it isn't—for instance if the first word is *clock* and the last word is *watch*—I do the activity again.

Then I ask each student to draw a line at the top center of his piece of paper. On this line, each student will write the same word, for instance *mirror* (remember the three introductory poems?). Or they can choose a word of their own. Students now make their own lists. Quickly! No right answers. Eight to ten words.

While students are writing, I quickly make sentences with the words on the board, in the order they appear. I can add words on either side of the list, or I can leave spaces before and after some words. I can change the tense of the verb, turn singular nouns into plurals, that sort of thing. My poem (rough draft, of course) might turn out like this:

*When my alarm clock gobbled up  
all of my best time to dream,  
my thoughts began racine, it was  
the sun competing with the moon,  
it was success calling to me,  
“Come, join my team.”*

Or this:

*When my inner clock, that I took to the  
mountains, clicked off and stilled the insistent  
mouse of desire,  
the cheesey dreams of success,  
what a soufflé of unexpected silence.  
How could disaster happen on such a day?  
Does sun crash into night?*

What if I get stuck? I ask students to help me. I always try to make something come alive. That is, I use personification in my model, as above, where the clock has a big appetite. When students see me using figures of speech, they may try doing the same.

Also, I purposely make my model messy. I don't erase mistakes; I draw lines through them. I circle words I'm not sure of. I stick in some afterthoughts, above and between words.

I read my poem to the students and ask them to write one of their own, using their own lists. Keeping the words in the same order, they should add words on either side, to make something that looks like a poem. Students can be serious or silly. Logical or not. They should let the language take them where it wants to go. They might say things they never thought before, or uncover topics for future poems just waiting to be found. There is no right answer.

And if a poem gets “off the track,” that's fine. Publishing poets will tell you they seldom know the ending of a poem until they get there, and it's often somewhere they weren't expecting to go. Experiencing “right brain” logic is one of the delights of chain poems! In the third of my three opening examples, we saw the word *mirror* eventually lead to the word *hijacking*. The effect of internal logic at work—the poet's awareness of vulnerability, perhaps, or of the transience of something as simple and lovely as running on a beach, under the chattering seagulls—comes precisely from this semantic disjunction.

But we don't want to analyze examples

### Mirror

*When I'm looking at me  
I'm trying to feel self-respect  
in the search of a certain attitude, but,  
knowing that the first impression  
can make you stand alone . . .*

*how to find somebody to love  
how to find happiness  
until that, unconsciousness*

—Sigrun F., high school, Freigericht-Somborn, Germany

*He says he's going to stop, but we know  
he never will.*

—Debbie M., freshman, Newport High School, Oregon

*Don't fence me in,  
for the gate is locked, and there  
is no other door.*

*Not even a window to look through.  
Let me see. Help me recover  
from blindness. I have  
no imagination.*

—A.S., fourth grade, Dunn Elementary, Eugene, Oregon

### Mirror

*Looking in the mirror  
I see my face, my  
smile reviling  
my teeth,  
which the dentist will soon be tamper-  
ing with.*

*From the office,  
my dad will be picking me up,  
smoking as usual,  
his cigarette lighted, and glowing  
at the end.*

*Many butts sit in the ashtray.*

*The fence sits  
by a stick, guarding  
the garden of  
blue grapes changing  
to wine over  
chilled ice.*

*Peaches burn to  
a city of raspberries.  
—L.H., fourth grade, Dunn Elementary,  
Eugene, Oregon*

Other examples of chain poems written for the “Mirror” assignment.



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with our students or to make our students self-conscious. The important thing is that surprise often happens in ways that are poetically satisfying. Writing quickly, spontaneously, often gives a boost to our intuitive sense. Learning to trust our instincts, we can pull words together in ways that communicate to ourselves and to our readers.

**Responding to Student Work**

I collect the poems and read them aloud—anonymously, if students are shy. Here's a secret code I use. If the student puts a name at the top, I can read the name. Name at the bottom, I won't.

Hearing the poems read aloud is an important last step. It demonstrates how different the poems are from each other, and in how many directions one word can travel. Chances are that the poems will also display some natural rhythms, or patterns of repetition, or musical sounds.

I resist the temptation to show students how to improve what they've written. That kind of activity comes later, after much more practice in writing, when students show you they are willing and eager to improve. Remember what Grampa, in the comic strip "For Better or For Worse," says about music lessons: "Playing an instrument is like falling in love. It's only when you're committed to the relationship that you're willing to accept the work." The same can be said for writing poems.

I also resist the temptation to analyze these spontaneous writings for purposes of therapy, or to think a student's secret, inner life is automatically revealed in these fragments of images and ideas. Chain poems take shape a bit like dreams do, blending snatches of this and that from who knows where: real-life memories and media fantasies; everyday facts and deep-

seated concerns; news reports and chocolate chips. The same student, writing two different chain poems in quick succession, will often produce two entirely different poems: different as night and day, in content and emotional tone.

Because the poems are coming from a spontaneous place, the words may refer to dark things. That's OK. I don't dwell on this. I think of such writing as catharsis: something that needed to be said, has found its way into words. At the most I'll say, "Hmm, I bet you didn't know you were going to write about that today!" or "Maybe you'd like to return to that subject later on, when we write poems again."

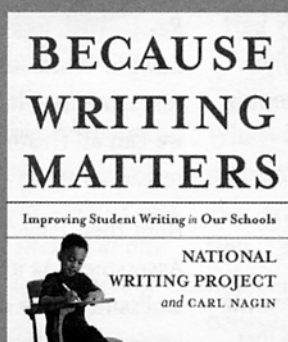
I reinforce, in my response, the student's success in "letting go" and letting the act of writing be the act of discovery. I point

out fresh uses of metaphor or strong rhythms. We're finding out that we can begin with nothing at all—or with just one word—and have more to say than we ever imagined.

I'm lavish with praise. I delight in the amazing and unpredictable adjective-noun combinations. I notice where the language sings. With my students, I enjoy all the wonderful surprises these poems give us.

And if you try a chain poem with your students, similar revelations may very well be available to you and to them.

INGRID WENDT'S twenty-five years with arts-in-education programs have taken her into hundreds of classrooms in the northwestern United States. She is a regular presenter at the Oregon Writing Project in Eugene, Oregon, and has recently presented at writing projects in California, Utah, and Washington.

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