

# **Poetry Prompts:** Emulating a model poem is a good way to get students to pen a poem of their own.

(from Lowell Jaeger, Montana Poet Laureate 2017-2019)

## **Suggestions for teachers:** (grades 8 – 12)

- Read the poem aloud. Read slowly, and read it more than once.
- Encourage discussion. Ask open-ended questions.
  - “How does the title help us understand poem?”
  - “Does the poem tell a story?”
  - “What do you picture in your mind when you hear this poem?”
  - “How does the poem want you to respond?”
- Allow students some quiet time to think and reflect.
  - Ask: “Have you experienced anything like the poem is talking about?”
- Read the prompt.
- Try a five minute “free write” in which students write as quickly as possible. “What words, images, or stories do the prompt make you think about?” These will serve as notes to begin shaping a poem.
- Guide students to understand that there is no single “right” way to write a poem. Every poem is an experiment. But . . . this doesn’t mean that every poem is a success. Readers can gauge whether the poem is enjoyable, meaningful. If readers are confused by the poem, use this feedback to encourage the poet to revise and clarify.
- Try a poetry “coffee house” in which students present their poems to an audience of their classmates.

## Suggestions for revisions:

- Does the poem need more details and specifics? Details and specifics help the reader to “see” in their mind’s eye what the poem is describing. An image is a picture in the imagination. We say, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” In this way, images can help a poem say important or powerful things with only a few words.
- “No meaning but in things,” said the poet William Carlos Williams. This means that poems are seldom made of ideas or abstractions. Encourage students to understand the difference between abstract language and concrete language. Images are built on concrete language, details and specifics.
- The poet Coleridge defined poetry as “the best words in the best order.” Encourage students to look closely at the language of the poem. Are there unnecessary words? Are the words of the poem fresh and interesting? Encourage students to identify clichés. Challenge students to find new ways of saying things. Use a Thesaurus to find the “best” word, not the biggest word.
- Rhyming is often the only type of poem students know. Allow them to rhyme if they must, but use the model poems in this packet to show that poetry can also not rhyme. Encourage students to try “free verse” poetry, poetry without rhyme. In revising a rhyming poem, ask students to identify where the rhyming seems awkward or forced. Where does the rhyming twist the poem’s meaning?
- Encourage students to see their poems as experiments. Scientists view a failed experiment not as failure but as the next step toward discovery. No poem is perfect; with effort, all poems can be improved. Encourage a “growth mindset” (see *Mindset*, by Carol Dwek).
- Encourage students to give their poem a title. A good title can tune the reader into the appropriate “channel” to best understand or experience what the poem has to say.
- Ambiguity in a poem can allow the reader to appreciate the poem in many ways. But . . . too much ambiguity will harm the poem’s communication. Resist the all-too-common misconception that a

poem “means whatever you want it to mean.” What words, phrases, lines, stanzas seem vague or confusing?

- Ask the poet to consider the reader. “How do you want the reader to react to this poem?” “Does this poem accomplish what it is intending to accomplish?”
- Young writers often want to write about themselves, and there’s nothing wrong with that. On the other hand, it’s a good exercise for young writers to write about something other than themselves. Encourage young writers to look outside themselves to see what the world around them has to say. Encourage poems which observe closely and report honestly.
- Lawrence Perrine, in his famous text, *Sound and Sense*, defined poetry as the “recreation of experience.” This means that the poem should be an experience for the reader; the reader should be participating in the poem rather than just listening. “Show, don’t tell,” is a popular aphorism among writing teachers. “Showing” is accomplished by giving readers specifics and details and letting readers use those cues to make connections on their own. Novice writers want to simply “tell” the reader about a thought or a feeling.
- Spelling and grammar are important considerations. Grammatical errors and spelling errors can distract or confuse the reader. Encourage students to practice saying thank you when someone points out an error. “Your poetry must be at least as good as your prose,” said the poet Ezra Pound.
- Encourage students to read poems. Make poetry a daily practice in your classroom. Garrison Keillor’s *The Writer’s Almanac* (NPR) features a poem daily. You can have Keillor’s poetry selection of the day sent to your email free of charge. Also, YouTube has a wide selection of poets reading and performing. These, too, can be valuable models.
- Contact me, Lowell Jaeger (Montana Poet Laureate 2017-2019) for a classroom visit. I can customize my visit to meet your students’ needs.

Lowell Jaeger

756-3907 (work) 261-1766 (cell) [ljaeger@fvcc.edu](mailto:ljaeger@fvcc.edu) (email)

## A Blessing

by James Wright

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.  
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies  
Darken with kindness.  
They have come gladly out of the willows  
To welcome my friend and me.  
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture  
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.  
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness  
That we have come.  
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.  
There is no loneliness like theirs.  
At home once more,  
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.  
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a particular moment with your favorite animal. Let the reader “see” the animal. Be detailed and specific.

## Confessions

by Lowell Jaeger

I once shoplifted  
a tin of Vienna sausages.  
Crouched in the aisle  
as if to study the syllables  
of preservatives, tore off the lid,  
pulled out a wiener and sucked it down.

I've cheated on exams.  
Made love to foldouts.  
Walked my paper route in a snowstorm after dark,  
so I could steal down a particular alley  
where through her gauze curtains, a lady  
lounged with her nightgown undone.

I've thrown sticks at stray dogs.  
Ignored the cat scratching to come inside.  
Even in the rain.  
Sat for idle hours in front of the TV, and not two feet away  
the philodendrons for lack of a glass of water  
gaspied and expired.

So many excuses I've concocted to get by.  
Called in sick when I was not. Grabbed credit  
for happy accidents I had no hand in.  
Pointed fingers  
to pin the innocent with crimes  
unmistakably mine.

I have failed  
to learn from grievous error.  
Repeated gossip.  
Invented gossip. Held hands  
in a circle of friends to rejoice  
over the misfortune of strangers.  
Pushed over tombstones.  
Danced the devil's jig.

Once, when I was barely old enough  
to walk home on my own, I hid  
behind an abandoned garage.  
Counted sixteen windows.  
Needed only four handfuls of stones  
to break every one.

**Your turn:** Write a poem by listing your petty crimes and embarrassing blunders, real or imagined. Or, write a poem titled “Things No One Knows About Me,” listing events in your life, small or large, that no one else knows but you.

# Dead Horse

by Thomas Lux

At the fence line, I was about to call him in when,  
at two-thirds profile, head low  
and away from me, he fell first  
to his right front knee  
and then the left, and he was down,  
dead before he hit the...  
My father saw him drop, too,  
and a neighbor, who walked over.  
He was a good horse, old,  
spavined, eating grass during the day  
and his oats and hay  
at night. He didn't mind, or try to boss, the cows  
with which he shared these acres.  
My father said: Happens. Our neighbor,  
named Malcolm, walked back to his place  
and was soon grinding toward us  
with his tractor's new backhoe,  
of which he was proud  
but so far used only to dig two sump holes.  
It was the knacker who'd haul away a cow.  
A horse, a good horse, you buried  
where he, or she, fell. Malcolm  
cut a trench beside the horse  
and we pushed him in.  
I'd already said goodbye  
before I tried to close his eyes.  
Our neighbor returned the dirt  
from where it came. In it: stones,  
stones never seen before  
by a human's, nor even a worm's, eye.  
With the back of a shovel  
we tamped the dirt down.  
One dumb cow  
stood by. It was a Friday.  
For supper we ate hot dogs, with beans  
on buttered white bread. Every Friday,  
hot dogs and beans.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about disposing of a particular pet or animal. Be detailed and specific. Let the reader “see” the story.

# Eagle Poem

by Joy Harjo

To pray you open your whole self  
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon  
To one whole voice that is you.  
And know there is more  
That you can't see, can't hear  
Can't know except in moments  
Steadily growing, and in languages  
That aren't always sound but other  
Circles of motion.  
Like eagle that Sunday morning  
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky  
In wind, swept our hearts clean  
With sacred wings.  
We see you, see ourselves and know  
That we must take the utmost care  
And kindness in all things.  
Breathe in, knowing we are made of  
All this, and breathe, knowing  
We are truly blessed because we  
Were born, and die soon, within a  
True circle of motion,  
Like eagle rounding out the morning  
Inside us.  
We pray that it will be done  
In beauty.  
In beauty.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a particular moment in which you glimpsed the sacredness of nature. Let the reader “see” what you saw and feel what you felt.



# God Says Yes To Me

by Kaylin Haught

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic  
and she said yes  
I asked her if it was okay to be short  
and she said it sure is  
I asked her if I could wear nail polish  
or not wear nail polish  
and she said honey  
she calls me that sometimes  
she said you can do just exactly  
what you want to  
Thanks God I said  
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph  
my letters  
Sweetcakes God said  
who knows where she picked that up  
what I'm telling you is  
Yes Yes Yes

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a question you would ask of God. What particular things would he/she say in response to your question?

# Grandmother

by Sherman Alexie

old crow of a woman in bonnet, sifting through the dump  
salvaging those parts of the world  
neither useless nor useful

she would be hours in the sweatlodge  
come out naked and brilliant in the sun  
steam rising off her body in winter  
like slow explosion of horses

she braided my sister's hair with hands that smelled of deep  
roots buried in the earth  
she told me old stories

how time never mattered  
when she died  
they gave me her clock

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a memorable or meaningful moment with your grandmother.  
Let the reader “see” your grandmother. Use details and specifics.

# Happiness

by Joyce Sutphen

This was when my daughters were just children  
playing on the rocky shore of the lake,

their hair in braids, their bright-colored jackets  
tied around their waists. It was afternoon,

the shadows falling away, their faces  
glowing with light. Whatever we said then

(and it must have been happy; it must have  
been hopeful) is lost as I am now lost

from that life I lived. This was when nothing  
that I wanted mattered, though all I wanted

was happiness, pure happiness, simple  
as strawberries and cream in a saucer,

as curtains floating from a window sill,  
as small pairs of shoes arranged in a row.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a moment in which you felt true happiness. Describe where you were, who you were with, what happened. Be specific. Use details. “Show” the action.

# I Ask My Mother to Sing

by Li-Young Lee

She begins, and my grandmother joins her.  
Mother and daughter sing like young girls.  
If my father were alive, he would play  
his accordion and sway like a boat.

I've never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace,  
nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch  
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers  
running away in the grass.

But I love to hear it sung;  
how the waterlilies fill with rain until  
they overturn, spilling water into water,  
then rock back, and fill with more.

Both women have begun to cry.  
But neither stops her song.

**Your turn:** Write a poem in which you describe in detail a moment you felt close to your mother. Use specific details. Let the reader “see” you and your mother interacting.

# Lies My Mother Told Me

by Elizabeth Thomas

If you keep eating raw spaghetti

you'll get pinworms,  
then I'll have to make  
a necklace of garlic for you to wear  
each night while you sleep,  
until they go away.

If you're mean to your younger brother, I'll know

because I have a special eye  
that spies on you when I'm not home.  
You cannot hide from it,  
so don't try.

If you touch your "down there"

any time other than when using the toilet,  
your hand will turn green and fall off.

If you keep crossing your eyes

they will stay that way  
until the wind  
changes direction.

It is bad luck to kill a moth. Moths are  
the souls of our ancestors and it just  
might be Papa paying a visit.

If you kiss a boy on the mouth

your lips will stick together  
and he'll use the opportunity  
to suck out your brains.

If you ever lie to me

God will know  
and rat you out.  
And sometimes  
God exaggerates.

Trust me —  
you don't want that  
to happen.

**Your turn:** Write a poem listing things adults have advised you to do. You might list advice which turned out to be useful and true. Or you might list advice which turned out to be less than useful or true.

# My Father's Diary

by Sharon Olds

When I sit on the bed, and spring the brass  
scarab legs of its locks, inside  
is the stacked, shy wealth of his print.  
He could not write in script, so the pages  
are sturdy with the beamwork of printedness,  
WENT TO LOOK AT A CAR, DAD IN A  
GOOD MOOD AT DINNER, LUNCH WITH MOM,  
TRIED OUT SOME RACQUETS—a life of ease,  
except when he spun his father's DeSoto on the  
ice, and a young tree whirled up  
to the hood, throwing up her arms—until  
LOIS. PLAYED TENNIS WITH LOIS, LUNCH  
WITH MOM AND LOIS, DRIVING WITH LOIS,  
LONG DRIVE WITH LOIS. And then,  
LOIS! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! SHE IS SO  
GOOD, SO SWEET, SO GENEROUS, I HAVE  
NEVER, WHAT HAVE I EVER DONE  
TO DESERVE SUCH A GIRL? Between the tines  
of his W's, and liquid on the serifs, moonlight,  
the self of the grown boy pouring  
out, kneeling in pine-needle weave,  
worshiping her. It was my father  
good, it was my father grateful,  
it was my father dead, who had left me  
these small structures of his young brain—  
he wanted me to know him, he wanted  
someone to know him.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about what you think your mother or father would write about you in their diary. Be specific and detailed. Let the reader “see” the action being described.

# My Father's Green Flannel Shirt

by Andrea Hollander Budy

He wore it when he mowed the grass, walked the dog,  
lounged with the Sunday papers. Whether  
it was his favorite, I'm not sure, the way  
I'm not sure if he cared for me  
more than for my brother. When I was a child,  
he would pull me aside sometimes  
and tell me a secret perhaps about his sister  
or one of the brothers he wasn't speaking to,  
a few times about my mother, whom I knew he loved  
but always something that nagged at him.

Afterwards he would tell me not to tell anyone,  
then walk away whistling the way  
Alec Guinness, in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*,  
walked away whistling when they let him out  
of solitary confinement, as if he knew  
something wonderful and important  
and no one could scare it out of him.  
Sometimes at dinner, my father would whistle  
that same tune. And wink at me.

How I loved being in cahoots with him. Loved  
feeling chosen, being the one selected to receive.  
I took each secret into me and kept it.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a particular item (clothing, car, hat, boots, etc.) owned by your father. Describe the thing in detail. Let the thing describe the person.

# My Room

by Patrick Kavanagh

10 by 12  
And a low roof  
If I stand by the side wall  
My head feels the reproof.

Five holy pictures  
Hang on the walls:  
The Virgin and Child  
St Anthony of Padua  
Leo the XIII  
St Patrick and the Little Flower.

My Bed in the centre  
So many things to me—  
A dining table  
A writing desk  
And a slumber palace.

My room in a dusty attic  
But its little window  
Lets in the stars.

**Your turn:** Write a poem listing the contents of your room or home. Let the contents of your room or home describe who you are and how you live.



## On Turning Ten

by Billie Collins

The whole idea of it makes me feel  
like I'm coming down with something,  
something worse than any stomach ache  
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light--  
a kind of measles of the spirit,  
a mumps of the psyche,  
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,  
but that is because you have forgotten  
the perfect simplicity of being one  
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.  
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.  
At four I was an Arabian wizard.  
I could make myself invisible  
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.  
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window  
watching the late afternoon light.  
Back then it never fell so solemnly  
against the side of my tree house,  
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage  
as it does today,  
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,  
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.  
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,  
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe  
there was nothing under my skin but light.  
If you cut me I could shine.  
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,  
I skin my knees. I bleed.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a specific incident or memory of a particular birthday. Use specifics and details to let the reader “see” the incident as it happens.

# Regret

by Lawrence Raab

Every day there's something old  
to feel sorry about—  
what I should have done and didn't,  
or what I did, and kept on doing.

I want to believe  
everyone's forgotten by now.  
Then I picture them thinking back.

And those who've died  
and earned the wisdom death allows  
just shake their heads and sigh.  
"Very funny," my father would say

after my sister and I played  
some cruel little joke on him.  
"Ha, ha," he'd add,  
to let us know he got the point.

We want to forget  
until we start to forget.  
We want the past to change,  
and we want it back.

"Enough is enough,"  
my father used to say  
to tell us it was over.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a particular moment that you did/didn't do something that you now regret. Describe the moment in detail.

# Richard Cory

By Edwin Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,  
We people on the pavement looked at him:  
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,  
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,  
And he was always human when he talked;  
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,  
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—  
And admirably schooled in every grace:  
In fine, we thought that he was everything  
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,  
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;  
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,  
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about someone you thought you knew but discovered they were not like you thought at all. Use specifics and details to let the reader “see” the person you are describing.

# The Fight

by Gregory Djanikian

It was over a girl,  
One boy had spoken to her,  
Had asked her out, the other  
Had been feeling with her  
The twitches of something serious.  
It was a misunderstanding,  
Something that might have been fixed,  
Talked out or around,  
But the whole school had turned out  
To watch them settle it.  
It was too late for talk,  
It was no longer just their fight,  
Something irrelevant and impure  
Had entered it, honor, looking  
More upright than the other,  
Things which had nothing to do  
With the girl, or desire,  
Or what she had whispered to one of them  
One night in a car.  
So they faced each other,  
Bringing their anger up  
By saying what finally did not matter  
But loudly enough so their bodies believed it.  
There was a sudden coming together,  
There were fists flailing  
While everybody, hundreds, watched.  
One was cut above the eye, the other's  
Knuckles were bloodied against teeth.  
It lasted half a minute until  
One of them pulled back and said  
Something like "This is stupid"  
And the other dropped his fists  
And watched him walk away

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a particular incident at school that sticks in your memory.  
Describe the incident in detail.

# The Meaning of Life

by Nancy Fitzgerald

There is a moment just before  
a dog vomits when its stomach  
heaves dry, pumping what's deep  
inside the belly to the mouth.  
If you are fast you can grab  
her by the collar and shove her  
out the door, avoid the slimy bile,  
hunks of half chewed food  
from landing on the floor.  
You must be quick, decisive,  
controlled, and if you miss  
the cue and the dog erupts  
en route, you must forgive  
her quickly and give yourself  
to scrubbing up the mess.

Most of what I have learned  
in life leads back to this.

**Your turn:** Write a poem about a particular incident in which you glimpsed something important about life. What did you learn from this incident? How did you use this incident to guide you? Describe the incident in detail.

# The Sacred

by Stephen Dunn

After the teacher asked if anyone had  
a sacred place  
and the students fidgeted and shrank

in their chairs, the most serious of them all  
said it was his car,  
being in it alone, his tape deck playing

things he'd chosen, and others knew the truth  
had been spoken  
and began speaking about their rooms,

their hiding places, but the car kept coming up,  
the car in motion,  
music filling it, and sometimes one other person

who understood the bright altar of the dashboard  
and how far away  
a car could take him from the need

to speak, or to answer, the key  
in having a key  
and putting it in, and going.

**Your turn:** In the poem above, the poet talks about how a car can be a “sacred” place when someone is young and growing and learning about themselves. Write a poem about a particular thing/object/possession in your life that feels sacred to you. Let the reader “see” what it is you are describing.

# Things I Know

by Joyce Sutphen

I know how the cow's head turns  
to gaze at the child in the hay aisle;

I know the way the straw shines  
under the one bare light in the barn.

How a chicken pecks gravel into silt  
and how the warm egg rests beneath

the feathers—I know that too, and  
what to say, watching the rain slide

in silver chains over the machine  
shed's roof. I know how one pail

of water calls to another and how  
it sloshes and spills when I walk

from the milk-house to the barn.  
I know how the barn fills and

then empties, how I scatter lime  
on the walk, how I sweep it up.

In the silo, I know the rung under  
my foot; on the tractor, I know

the clutch and the throttle; I slip  
through the fence and into the woods,

where I know everything: trunk  
by branch by leaf into sky.

**Your Turn:** Write a poem listing lessons you've learned in life. Be sure to give the reader details for each item on your list of life-lessons. Let the reader "see" how you learned the lessons you mention.