

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS:

- A suggestion for establishing a safe space for creative expression
- 3 lesson plans
- Samples of poems from the presenter and students
- A list of Works Cited and Additional Recommended Resources

TIME FRAME:

- 1-2 class sessions

TARGET AGE:

- Grades 10-12

DISCIPLINE:

- LANGUAGE ARTS

A Study Guide from Chicago Humanities Festival 2009 SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

POETRY with *cin salach*



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cin salach, poet of the page and stage, has collaborated with musicians, painters, poets, video artists, dancers, and photographers. She has been widely published in literary journals and anthologies, including most recently, *Court Green*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, and *Fifth Wednesday*. salach's work has also been highlighted on *Oprah*, *Studs Terkel*, and *This American Life*.

**word choice :: poetry
essence :: truth**

cin salach focuses on the notion that a poet must choose his or her words intentionally, to whittle them down to their finest essence in order to convey the most essential truth. The following activities are designed to help students understand the power of word choice and specificity in poetry.

ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, to enjoy, and to support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities—at a low ticket price—depends in part on the generosity of its committed and enthusiastic supporters. www.chicagohumanities.org

GETTING STARTED:

PREPARING THE SPACE

PURPOSE: Writing poetry that is honest and intentional is the goal of the poetry exercises that follow this warm up. Students have to be present in the activities in order to find the essence of what they are trying to say. This activity reminds students to put aside whatever distractions may prevent them from full engagement.

TIMEFRAME: 5-15 minutes.

INSTRUCTION:

- Light a candle that students can easily and safely pass around the room. (If you are working with younger students you may want to use a rock instead.)
- Pass the candle around the room and ask each student to put in the candle whatever distractions may prevent them from participating fully in the lessons. For example: "I put in the candle my fear that I didn't study enough for the math test I have next period." It can be useful for the teacher to begin the exercise to help set the tone and provide an example to students.
- At the end of the lesson, pass the candle around again to let each student take out something that they learned from the lesson. For example: "I learned the benefit of taking the time to pick the right word."

POSSIBLE CHANGES:

This activity takes a good amount of time that many teachers can't set aside on a daily basis. As a possible alternative, teachers can purchase a paper shredder that they leave somewhere in the room. During the first week, the class can complete the activity as a group, and then the

teacher can inform the student that the shredder will be available for them whenever they feel distracted. Students can take care of this before the bell rings and they can do so with more privacy. Also, teachers can use this to keep students on task. If the students appear to be distracted, teachers can recommend that they shred those distractions and then get back to work.

#1: THE TWELVE-WORD AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POEM

PURPOSE: This activity requires students to become more intentional with each new line. The limiting factor of choosing from existing text forces students to play around with word choice and placement, thus making this an exercise in diction.

READING SELECTION:

12 word autobiographical poem
by cin salach

Born to speak words in a long soft song
that's sometimes silent.

Born to words, soft sometimes silent.

Born words silent.

Born.

TIMEFRAME: This activity can be done in 1 to 2 class periods.

INSTRUCTION:

- Ask students to write an autobiographical statement that uses exactly twelve words. This will make up the first line of the poem.

- For the second line, have the students choose six of their original twelve words to make a new sentence.
- For the third line, condense the sentence down to three words from the six. Salach notes that it is in moving from six words to three that the author moves from logic to essence.
- For the final line, choose one of the three words to end the poem.

After everyone has finished, go around the room and read aloud only the last line of each poem to make a class poem of last words. You may want to perform the poem twice to give students a chance to practice and to experiment with the poem as “performance.”

Discuss the experience both of writing the poem and of sharing it. Was it easy or difficult to choose the last word? Was any sentence more or less true than the others? Were there any interesting pairs of words in the performance? Did the words seem similar or varied?

RELATED ACTIVITY:

A teacher can achieve similar results from writing “found poems” (poems made from words found within a text) or by condensing paragraphs that students have previously written. Students could write a short paragraph on the topic of their poem and condense that paragraph down to a certain number of words and lines. This may free them from writing poems that are truly just paragraphs with different spacing and it can help them to find the essence of what they are trying to say. To take it one step further, have students exchange their poems with other students in the class. Then, assign those students the task of turning the poems back into paragraphs to see how close they came to the originals.

#2 FIVE-LINE “I REMEMBER” POEMS

PURPOSE: This activity is designed to highlight the paradox of the universality of specific details. The more general an author tries to be, the less the piece connects with its audience; however, specific details tend to speak directly to the reader. Encourage students to be as specific as possible and workshop the pieces with that in mind. Have students read one another’s poems and highlight when details seem too general or offer suggestions to make them more specific.

READING SELECTIONS:

“I Remember...” Poems

I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.

I remember how much I used to stutter.

I remember the first time I saw television..
Lucille Ball was taking ballet lessons.

I remember Aunt Cleora who lived in Hollywood. Every year for Christmas she sent my brother and me a joint present of one book.

I remember a very poor boy who had to wear his sister’s blouses to school.

I remember shower curtains with angel fish on them.

I remember very old people when I was very young. Their houses smelled funny.

I remember opening jars that nobody else could open.

I remember winning a Peter Pan Coloring Contest and getting a free pass to the movies for a year.

I remember not understanding why people on the other side of the world didn’t fall off.

—excerpt from Joe Brainard’s book-length poem
I Remember about growing up in 1950’s America

I remember a wild stallion rearing like magic through the wild river.

I remember a plane taking me through clouds of visions.

I remember a star flashing red and blue in the dark breeze.

I remember a cloud that looked like a beautiful dragon in disguise.

I remember a wolf large enough to ride but it dashed away slicing snow.

Shauna, 5th

I remember the day my favorite rabbit died.

I picked him up, and he was light and cold and hard.

Emma, 10th

TIMEFRAME: This activity can be done in 1 class period.

INSTRUCTION:

- Ask students to write a five-line poem where each line starts with the phrase “I remember...”
- The poem can focus on one memory or a series of five connected memories.
- For the parameters that guide the rest of each line, direct students to focus on specific details and descriptive language rather than referring to the event directly.

RELATED ACTIVITY: This activity is a great lead-in to the activity that follows (Year-by-Year or Birthday Poems). The specific details regarding memories should help them write more poignant poems.

#3 YEAR-BY-YEAR OR BIRTHDAY POEMS

PURPOSE: Writing this poem is another great exercise for striving to achieve truth by capturing the essence of a memory. It is also a great reminder of the importance of specific details. The more general and vague students are with their memories, the less effective the poem becomes. Conversely, the more specific they are, the more universal their poem can become.

READING SELECTION:

until now
by cin salach

1. nothing
2. mom pulls me through Chicago to a tiny grocery where the sun smells like popsicles to the day care in the basement of my brother's school I look around recognize no one walk out this is the ballsiest I will ever be
3. pajamas with feet feel better than anything
4. the doctor asks if we have anything at home to hold a pillow around my brother's just broken arm so he doesn't accidentally hit himself with the new cast while he sleeps I offer my green plastic jump rope the fan in the back porch window ringer washing machine bird bath an alley that's not my grand-ma's
5. our new house is not finished so here we are standing in the clay-stained foundation we move in and snow falls to the top of the garage mom pulls me effortlessly through winter
6. my brother hates me
7. here are all the foods I hate brussel sprouts asparagus meatloaf salisbury steak milk beets creamed corn fish sticks chili peas
8. I lose glasses buttons mittens time all the time flinch then pee when dad's lips tighten for god's sake what were you I will wake up I will wake up I will wake up I will wake up
9. nature arranges to meet me in Schaumburg the quiet water creeks its way through everyone's quarter acre back back to it's own wild yard
10. I steal bottles of Yago Sangria from the garage have impromptu tea parties with Barbie and Midge even Skipper gets a little sip in a few years I will bring test tubes of vermouth to junior high drink it with long straws out of my purse meanwhile dad wraps apiece of gold cloth around plywood cut to lay perfectly across the washer & dryer voila! instant party bar! I peek at guests through metal banisters beautiful adults with beautiful drinks night feels better than anything
11. I'm a hippiegypsyirate every year until the year I'm too old to trick or treat then I go as myself a two-headed ghost with Nicole

12. dear diary today I got my period and the Bulls lost even though Norm Van Lier played his heart out the refs sucked poems a guitar battery-operated turntable love was out to get me lilac bedroom
13. the coach asks if she can sign my yearbook I blush I don't know why I blush I read what she writes again and again
14. I sleep over at Gail's house in an old flannel shirt of my dad's it comes down to my knees but Gail's brother's hands find their way underneath before anyone else is awake including me after that he drives by my house every night for a month honks the horn and shouts cindy I am flattered nervous embarrassed scared cindy
15. I want to work at McDonald's because Cheryl works at McDonald's but I'm not sixteen why am I so hot to be around a bunch of grease and bad meat?
16. get the job and smell like grease and bad meat 10-15 hours a week drink a lot to fit in drink a lot to disappear drink a lot to worry my parents but alcohol seems to be the only thing in the world they are not afraid of
17. run my wrists over fencetops not very hard not hard enough for anyone to notice not hard enough to bleed hard enough for anyone to notice
18. not eating feels better than anything
19. lots of almost sex lots of almost almos'ts lots of NO lots of panting skin flourescent breath dormi-tory coffee
20. finally someone I want inside me slim boy blond painter my second true love he would do any-thing for me anything he does
21. sex tell mom she says she though I already had she says she thought I lost it in Paris when I was 17 with that french guy Ernest she says that's what my father thinks too for god sake's what were you graduate move back home make love to slim boy painter in my brother's old bedroom make my parents buy one of his paintings
22. I waitress serve double entendres to customers during happy hour they leave popular songs as tips I withhold cleavage and my career withers
23. a job in advertising to match my degree an apartment in the city to shed Schaumburg I am not young
24. another slim boy with slim hair and a good beat I can dance too he writes my name in a heart on the mat-tress then gives me the mattress as a moving present I move
25. start to sing in my sleep even take requests
26. slimboy brushed away somede'ad skin held up a mirror showed me some nerves my nerves ex-posed still raw gasping for air like little heads nostrils flaring tongues lapping at somefresh air it was less than a second and new skin scarred over this aggressive innocence less than a second but I felt the conception take place

27. I love my own-ness my own place my own bed my own shower with a window and a tree outside the window my own treehouse shower I love my tiny kitchen how I never eat in it I love the el sleeking by right outside my window I love when I look up and see the passengers staring in I love when I wave to them and they wave back I love the surrealness of public transportation moving right through the private middle of my apartment I love being a good hostess to it
28. sex is a black hole I dream marriage will erase
29. somewhere between runaway breasts and kamikaze semen a new life begins if I keep the baby I could name it woody or even allen
30. single parent of two little kittens learn how to kiss little heads clean little ears name them stroke them purr back
31. no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no ok
32. marriage wraps around me like a new tattoo
33. this is the year I do not have a nervous breakdown I do not jump out of the window I do not kill anyone including myself no one seems to notice
34. the house is rising and I am treading water treading water so hard my chin rests right on the surface of drowning/not drowning my breath is oily gold my skin is blue
35. swimbikerun swimbikerun swimbikerun I move in threes
36. leave nine-to-five like a lover I've finally outgrown slip quietly into oblivion oblivion begins to feel like my new name cinoblivion cinoblivion yes
37. I fall in love with women I fall in love with one woman I fall into the glassblower's breath I play with sober I stay with fire I start a family
38. nothing
39. everything
- 40.

TIMEFRAME: This activity can be done in 1 to 2 class periods.

INSTRUCTION:

- Have students number a sheet of paper from one to their current age (i.e. 1, 2, 3...16) Tell students to leave plenty of lines between each number because they will be writing lines of poetry after these numbers.
- Ask the students to write down the first memory that pops into their minds when they think of themselves at the age that corresponds to each number.

- The students should then write a line or stanza of poetry that captures that memory—anything from one word to several sentences.
- This poem can be an unfinished work that the students can add to each year.

TAKING IT FURTHER:

This poem demonstrates the freedom and effectiveness of writing within the confines of a specific form. Many times students get stuck because the world of poetry is too open. Giving them specific tasks can help them to achieve faster success. This activity would be a great lead-in to a conversation about forms of poetry. Students could try to write other specific structures from the more common (haiku, limerick, sonnet) to the more obscure (pantoum, villanelle, sestina) to try out other forms, or the students could create their own forms to share with their classmates.

This poem would also serve as a great brainstorming activity before students are asked to write personal narratives since it catalogues major memories by year. Students would have a variety from which to choose, and they may avoid more cliché topics because of this more detailed list. It would also be a helpful tool to use for junior or senior students who are about to write college essays. These specific memories may help them to answer certain essay questions on the college application.

WORKS CITED

Brainard, Joe. *I Remember*. New York: Granary Books, 1976, 2001.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS

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Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1986, 2005.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1970, 1999.

Lamott, Annie. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

Lerman, Liz and John Borstel. *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*. Available at: <http://www.danceexchange.org/performance/criticalresponse.html>

McSweeney's, especially Issue #31 (March 2009) on Form.

Postman, Neil, "Future Schlock" from *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education*. New York: First Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 162-174.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Teachers and Writers Collaborative:

www.twc.org

Teachers & Writers Collaborative (T&W) seeks to educate the imagination by offering innovative creative writing programs for students and teachers, and by providing a variety of publications and resources to support learning through the literary arts.

SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS (SIT)

Each year, the Chicago Humanities Festival offers the Summer Institute for Teachers (SIT). This three-day workshop is designed for educators interested in personal and professional growth with lectures, workshops, and discussions from presenters who work in professional fields related to the yearly topic. The 2009 SIT theme was Creative Writing: Innovative Approaches to Writing & Reading in the Classroom. Presenters included cin salach on POETRY, Lawrence Weschler on NARRATIVE NON-FICTION, Stuart Flack on PLAYWRIGHTING, Josh Elder on GRAPHIC NOVELS, Natalie Moore on JOURNALISM, and Bayo Ojikutu on FICTION.

This lesson plan and comprehensive bibliography were developed by SIT's Master Teacher, Greg Wright, from Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, and CHF staff based on Ms. salach's presentation at the 2009 Summer Institute for Teachers.