## **CHF STUDY GUIDES**

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The "Classroom Poetry Ideas" on the following pages appeared in the 2004 Chicago Humanities Festival spring study guide.

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### Bring the chf into the Classroom!

## Classroom Poetry Ideas: Teaching Time and Poetry

Encountering poetry means encountering time: The cadence of the poet's language may make a line may race forward or plod along. The various verse forms have distinct relationships to time—a haiku is a vessel for a moment, an epic for an age. A word or image repeated may make time swirl like an eddy. Interruptions can make a poem inhale and exhale, sometimes faster, sometimes slower. We asked writers Cin Salach and Christopher Merrill to share their suggestions for teaching time and poetry.

Timed Writing 
Suggested by Cin Salach

This exercise is designed to reveal how time dictates what and how we write.

Assign a writing topic. Everyone can write on the same topic, or each student can pick her own; however, the same topic must be used for each of the timed exercises. First, ask the students to write on the topic for thirty seconds. Then have them write on the same topic for three minutes. Then for fifteen. Then thirty. These exercises can be done all on one day, or spread out across subsequent classes.

Ask students to read aloud from the different timed writings. Discuss how time may have dictated both form and content. Discuss preferences, surprises, another other observations.

Time-of-Day Journal Poems 
Suggested by Cin Salach

This project reveals how by writing we are recording time.

Ask students to choose between morning journals or bedtime journals. Students are to spend fifteen minutes each day writing at a specific time of their choice. Once a time has been selected, each student should stay as close to that writing schedule as possible. Students must write for fifteen minutes—no more, no less. This is to be done for a duration of the teacher's choice, ranging from one week to an entire term. The student is not to look back at her writing until the whole exercise is over, whether after a week or some longer duration. The student is then to take all of that writing and collage it into one poem.

Discuss how the morning poems vary from the bedtime poems with regard to attitude, content, and tone. How does the time of day come through? What are the morning writers like? bedtime writers?

# The Pantoum Suggested by Cin Salach

Verse forms draw attention to time in various ways, making the poet and listener aware of cadence, pauses, duration, and so forth. The pantoum is a fun verse form that makes time flutter in a circle.

It consists of an indefinite number of quatrain stanzas with particular restrictions: Lines two and four of each stanza become in their entirety lines one and three of the following stanza, and so on. Lines can be any length, in any meter. However, the poem is ended with a quatrain whose second and fourth lines are the third and first lines of the first stanza. Thus the first and last line of the poem are the same. An example follows.

#### A Prairie Pantoum

There is no ocean on the prairie.
There is no desert buried here.
Everywhere is flat skies & storms fading.
Everywhere is midwest & blue.

There is no desert buried here
where stones mark memory's gravesite.
Everywhere is midwest & blue.
Everywhere is crows & gold.

Where stones mark memory's gravesite the river follows its own processional. 10 Everywhere is crows & gold. Everywhere is tides turning.

The river follows its own processional.

Leaves give in to wind's quick tongue.

Everywhere is tides turning.

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Everywhere is time undone.

Leaves give in to wind's quick tongue.

Sparks spin quickly to the ground.

Everywhere is time undone.

Everywhere is cattails prowling.

Sparks spin quickly to the ground catching red in six foot waves. Everywhere is cattails prowling. Everywhere is rolling air.

Catching red in six foot waves, I'm swimming in a field of fire. Everywhere is rolling air. Everywhere is burning shore.

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Swimming in a field of fire, everywhere is midwest & blue, everywhere is burning shore. There is no ocean on the prairie

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but I found a sea, this poem's door.

—Cin Salach

Make a Line Fast, Make a Line Slow Suggested by Christopher Merrill

This exercise is designed to attune students to the pace of a poem.

Ask students to think about what it would take to speed up or slow down a poem. There are numerous possible answers. Specifically, try this exercise on cadence: Ask students to write three lines of ten syllables each. Six to eight syllables have to be stressed. Now, ask students to again write three lines of ten syllables each, but this time each line can have only 2 or three stresses. Discuss which lines move quicker. How does the number of stressed syllables affect your sense of time?