How can I turn my students on to writing... real writing; writing that is vivid; writing that grips the readers and carries them on a breathless journey with the writer? How can I help my students break out of the box into which conventional instruction has inadvertently stuck them; a box in which the constraints of conventions—varied sentence types, accurate punctuation, and spelling—provide neat little boundaries that keep the writing from spilling messily unto the pristine pages?

These questions haunted me daily as I struggled to take my 1st- and 2nd-grade students through the writing process as I then understood it. In my obsession to have my students write appropriately punctuated sentences of varying lengths and types, in which the subjects agreed with the verbs and the adjectives properly described the nouns, I had reduced their writing to lifeless, voiceless strings of words that lacked power, character, or real meaning. And so I was in a fix. Yes, I wanted them to follow the conventions, but more than anything else, I wanted to see my students’ hearts revealed in their writing. I wanted their writing to matter to them and to wider audiences. I wanted to see a rhythmic flow of powerful, colorful sentences coursing through white pages and culminating in a euphoric experience for both reader and writer.

Although I knew what good writing looked like and sounded like, I didn’t know how to help my students produce the quality of writing that I desired—writing that pulsed with action and feeling and beautiful language. One day, I shared my frustration with my literacy mentor, Dr. Krystal Bishop of Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. She introduced me to a series of books written by Regie Routman on how to teach 1st and 2nd graders to love writing. Routman maintains that poetry writing is the answer. At first, I was skeptical because except for occasionally reading aloud a poem or two to my students, I hadn’t considered poetry as a writing genre, and I didn’t feel qualified to teach it. Poetry writing, I thought, would have to wait for a more accomplished teacher in a later grade. What a surprise was in store for my students and me! Routman was about to completely revolutionize the way I taught writing.

Routman drew me in from the first page of her book, where she wrote: “Poetry writing is the surest, easiest way I know to turn kids on to writing. Kids love it. Teachers love it. It’s fun and easy for everyone (including the teacher).” She was referring to free-verse poetry writing. Such poetry does not have to rhyme, and it allows stu-
students the freedom of choice—not just of topic, but of form, layout, spacing, patterns, and even conventions. Because it has few restrictions, students with a range of skills and abilities can write free-verse poetry successfully. When I introduced it into my classroom, I discovered that Routman was correct. My students began to find joy and success in writing. Even the most reluctant writers joined our writing community and discovered that writing was something they could do; more importantly, it was something they wanted to do.

The Beginning

I began the unit by showing students poems written by other 1st and 2nd graders from Routman’s books, rather than poems composed by accomplished adults. I shared both the rough draft of each poem and the final product. My students reacted positively to the rough drafts with all the mistakes. “We can do that, too!”

Next, I told them that at the end of the unit we would go to the nearby Barnes and Noble Booksellers and share our poems with parents and friends during an event entitled “An Evening of Poetry.” I gave the time and date of the event. Knowing that they were writing for a purpose—a performance on a specific date—not only motivated my students to give their best effort every day, but also to patiently go through the process of revising and editing their work for publication. The power of performance is described by Dillingham in these words: “By performing their own stories, students provide an opportunity for parents and community members to see them creating and performing authentic literature while conducting themselves in a professional manner.”

On the second day, we engaged in shared writing. My students helped me compose an original poem about things I like. To help them get started, I read aloud several free-verse poems on hobbies, brainstormed about the things I like, made a list, and then wrote this poem from the list:

**Things I Like**

- Warm sunshine on my face
- Children playing in the rain
- Chocolate-covered lollipops
- But there’s nothing I like better than Shopping at the mall!

Rather than gathering the ideas for this poem beforehand, I instead did a “think-aloud” to let students “see” me think and struggle. This made them feel comfortable about offering suggestions and helping me when I got stuck. My students were intrigued by the idea that poets can write about anything, the poem doesn’t have to be long, and the lines don’t have to rhyme. They felt that the assignment was easy and something they could do. The modeling and think-aloud gave them much-needed insight into the process as well as the confidence to try.

My students eagerly copied the strategies they had seen me use and produced their first poems. I ended this session by having willing students share what they had written. It was an exhilarating experience for all of us! I had discovered the secret of setting students free to write—when you model it, do it together, let them practice, and give them support . . . magic can happen. This experience signaled the birth of a writing teacher—me!

Each succeeding day began with a few selected students sharing poems they had written the day before. Having some students share at the beginning of each class period allowed them to demonstrate how they had incorporated the new learning from each mini-lesson into their poems. A poem didn’t have to be completed to be shared. Any demonstration of beautiful language, strong beginnings and endings, or unique shape was an opportunity for sharing and celebration. Students were always excited when they were chosen to present their writing at the beginning of the day’s lesson.

After the sharing and celebration of good writing, I would teach a 10-minute mini-lesson followed by shared writing, during which my students and I would construct a poem together using the new strategy from the mini-lesson. After this scaffolding, students would be set free to write a free-verse poem on any topic of interest to them or to revise one of their poems to reflect that day’s lesson. I would conference with students as they wrote, noting what they were doing well, offering suggestions, and giving help when they got stuck. Sometimes students needed help expressing an idea, finding the exact verb or adjective, or just getting started on a topic. Each session lasted for an hour.

The Procedures

Following is a list of mini-lessons that I chose to teach after reading Routman’s two books:

1. **Defining Poetry:** After reading and examining several poems written by their peers, students identified the differences between prose and poetry writing (shape, short sentences, conventions, artistic writing, rhythm, etc.). The differences they identified were posted on chart paper and displayed for easy reference throughout the unit.

2. **Choosing a Topic:** After reading and examining poems, my students and I brainstormed and listed ideas, then posted this chart for easy reference.

3. **Length of a Poem:** After reading several poems of varying length, we noticed that a poem could range in length from one or two words on a line to two- to five-line stanzas.

4. **Rhythm:** My students noticed...
that although every poem did not have a rhythm or beat, rhythm increases the impact of a poem and can be created by repetition, sentence length, and line breaks.

5. Shape: Students noticed that poems are shaped differently from prose writing and that a poem may take the shape of the idea expressed in the poem.

6. Voice: For this mini-lesson, my students and I played a game. With eyes shut, we tried to identify who was speaking. I explained how the reader can discern the poet’s voice from reading the poem. Students identified types of voices such as sad, silly, etc. These were posted on chart paper.

7. Use of Expressive Language—Adjectives and Strong Verbs: We identified exact adjectives and strong verbs in poems we read. We also discussed how writers use their senses to construct beautiful language. A list of exact adjectives and strong verbs was posted on chart paper. Students added to this chart throughout the unit.

8. Use of Expressive Language—Similes and Metaphors: We identified similes and metaphors in poems we read, and discussed their impact. A list of these was posted on chart paper. Students added to this chart throughout the unit.

9. Use of Expressive Language—Alliteration and Onomatopoeia: We identified alliteration and onomatopoeia in our poetry reading, and discussed their impact. Illustrations of alliteration and onomatopoeia were posted on chart paper. Students added to this chart throughout the unit.

10. Beginnings and Endings: We identified strong beginnings and endings and discussed what makes a strong beginning and ending. These ideas were recorded on chart paper.

11. Revising and Editing a Poem: Students chose two poems for revising, editing, and publishing. We discussed the importance of revising and editing, and the role of the editor.

12. Publishing Poems: My students and I studied several published poems and identified the various ways to present the final draft (rewriting, typing, artistic illustrations, etc.).
Each mini-lesson began with a read-aloud of poems that highlighted the particular feature of a poem on which we would focus for that day. Students need to see the strategy in use by “real writers.” This enables them to “stand on the shoulders” of these authors and use the authors’ poems as scaffolds during the writing process. My students were fascinated by the poems of Shel Silverstein, so I used the poem “Lazy Jane” to demonstrate how to shape a poem to reinforce the image of the idea expressed in the poem.

One of my 2nd graders wrote and published Shape Poem A in response to the mini-lesson on that subject. A 1st grader wrote and published Poem B in response to the lesson on voice.

On the day I taught the first mini-lesson on beautiful language, I took my students outdoors and talked to them about how writers use their senses to construct beautiful language. It was a rewarding experience for all of us. One of my students created Poem C (page 24) outdoors in about 10 minutes. She titled it “Nature.”

**The Daily Schedule for One Week**

10:00 – Sharing, noticing, and discussing students’ poems
10:10 a.m. – Teaching a mini-lesson on some feature of poetry
10:20 a.m. – Brainstorming ideas for poetry writing
10:25 a.m. – Modeling: Using the “think aloud” strategy, I write a poem for the class or do a shared writing.
10:35 a.m. – Independent writing
10:55 a.m. – Sharing and celebrating
11:00 a.m.

**The Effect**

The experience lasted for six weeks and culminated in the Evening of Poetry so graciously facilitated by Barnes and Noble Booksellers. They carved out a cozy place in their store with
comfortable chairs, microphones, and a small podium for the students. I made a DVD of the event that I use to motivate new writers every year. Since that time (2006), I have taught a four-week unit on poetry every April (National Poetry Month), and my students always present their work to a wider audience. One year, they created individual anthologies of original poems from which they read at our school’s annual awards ceremony.

From Poetry to Prose

The purpose of the poetry-writing unit was to transform all aspects of my students’ writing, not just their poetry. And it did! More importantly, it transformed my approach to teaching writing. It provided me with a structure for teaching all writing: modeling, practicing, guiding, supporting, and finally celebrating the writing. This is actually the writers’ workshop model, which I have come to embrace as a friend to writing teachers and their students. This model has helped my students and me to continue to experience success every day as we navigate this challenging but important and often neglected component of the language arts.

My students’ prose writing is often reflective of the mini-lessons taught in the poetry unit. For example, one of my 2nd graders (who had written poetry with me the year before) wrote the following non-fiction piece about eagles. Since this was writing she cared about, she chose to edit her rough draft using a red pen.

Eagles

Eagles are smart birds. Wow! Eagles are like arrows shooting from the sky. They have eyes like targets. They’re looking for food. Amazing! There are different kinds of eagles, like the American eagle and the bald eagle. The eagle watches for its prey to come. Swoop! The eagle gets its prey.

Fun Fact: Did you know that eagles eat rats?

This same 2nd grader composed the narrative piece (below left) and published it in our school’s weekly newsletter.

Final Thoughts

“Poetry matters. At the most important moments, when everyone else is silent, poetry rises to speak.” In my own struggles to turn students on to writing, I have found that poetry does matter. It matters as a way to teach students the elements of descriptive writing; it matters as an outlet for their emotions and questions about life; it matters as a way of enticing even the most reluctant writer to participate in the community of writers; and it matters as a way to get students to care about their writing. Poetry, then, is a key that teachers should use to unlock the writing potential in students and to set them free to write.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

5. Permission granted to reproduce the children’s drawings and poems.