

This Is Just to Say: Poems of Apology and Forgiveness

Reader's Guide

These suggestions are for grades 4-8.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do any of the poems in this book trigger memories of something that happened to you or your family/friends?
2. Which pair of poems is your favorite? Why?
3. Which poems from the first section are really apologies, and which are something else?
4. Do you wish each pair of Apology and Response poems had been printed together, instead of separated into their own sections? Why do you think the author made the decision to separate them?
5. What do you think of Anthony's relationship with his mother? What clues are you given?
6. Which one of the kids do you think is the anonymous poet that wrote "How Slow-Hand Lizard Died"?

WRITING EXERCISES

Apology Poems

The idea for apology poems comes from Kenneth Koch's book *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children*, which I highly recommend to any classroom teacher interested in teaching poetry. As Koch says, the basic idea of this poem is to "apologiz[e] for something you're really secretly glad you did."

1. Read aloud the poem "This Is Just To Say" by William Carlos Williams, on page 6 of the book.
2. Discuss: who wrote the poem? To whom was he writing it? Why did he do it? Is he really sorry?
3. Reread "Sparkling Deer," and discuss this in a similar way. Then choose an incident from your own (the teacher's) past that you regret. Have your students help you write a poem on the board apologizing for this incident, but also explaining why you couldn't help yourself. What tempted you? Include lots of sights, smells, and sounds.
4. Have each student choose his or her own past incident to write about. It can be from years ago, or yesterday. The important thing is to write the poem so that the reader understands exactly why the writer did what he/she did. Include: sensory details from the incident, and feelings before and after.

Note: Many students find this type of poem easier to write if they assume another persona, like that of their dog (see "Sorry Back, from the Hamster" on page 37).

Response Poems

If your students are feeling especially brave, have them give their sorry poems to the person they've apologized to. Several things might happen subsequently:

1. An interesting talk between the two parties involved, which the student could write about.
2. Your student could ask the recipient to respond on paper, either in a poem or letter format.
3. Your students, as a class, could gather the apology poems and write-ups/responses and make a book of them, as Mrs. Merz's class did. See "Creating a Class Book."

List Poems

List poems are fun, unthreatening, and often surprisingly poignant.

1. Read "What Girls Want" (page 36) with your class. Flip back to "Not Really" (page 18) and discuss why Maria wrote what she did in response to Bobby's poem.
2. Write a few lines of a poem entitled "What Teachers Want" on the board, perhaps with students making suggestions.
3. Brainstorm themes for other list poems with your students: What Boys Want, What Dogs Want, What Kids Want, What Baseball Players Want, etc.
4. Have each student pick their own topic for a list poem, expressing their own thoughts and wishes.

CREATING A CLASS BOOK

Class books can be a lot of work, but they are tangible evidence of your students' creative endeavors, and deeply satisfying to the class when completed. They can be a simple compendium of a unit's worth of writing, or a more elaborate, illustrated volume that can be placed in a Media Center.

Decisions that need to be made:

1. What is the theme? Some classes simply choose a favorite poem(s) from each student to include. Others organize the book around a theme that relates to some other unit of study—Rainforest Poems, e.g.
2. Who types it up? In this day and age of computer literacy, there is no reason why each student can't type up his or her own piece of writing. It is up to you how serious you want to be in checking spelling, punctuation, and grammar before the final drafts are collected.

3. How will it be organized? You may want to appoint an Editorial Board, as Mrs. Merz did, to check over the final pieces and organize them into sections. This can be fun for a handful of literary kids, but it is also more work for you!
4. Illustrations or not? Illustrations are wonderful, of course. Each student could do their own, or several artistically minded students could provide them. Pen and ink drawings around the edge of each poem will make them easier (and cheaper) to reproduce; color copies are expensive.
5. One book for the classroom or one for each student? There are several ways to go here. Simple spiral-bound volumes done on a copy machine are easy to make and can be distributed to each student to keep (you do need a spiral-binding machine). You can also produce a more elaborate volume with original color art that stays in the classroom or is donated to the Media Center for posterity!

© Joyce Sidman 2012 *May be copied for classroom use but may not be reprinted or resold for commercial purposes.*