

# Cat Watching: Six Easy Steps to Classroom Poetry

BY SCOTT PETERSON

One day I was sitting in the window of a downtown cafe savoring my morning coffee when I realized that a cat in the upstairs window of the house across the street was staring at me.

It was an orange and white tabby, stretched out flat in the window sill, its fluffy head taking in the street scene below. Relaxed yet observant, it would gaze placidly at the world, then jerk around quickly to catch an interesting movement or respond to an unusual sound.

While I continued to sip my coffee, the cat and I continued our leisurely surveillance of the world as it unfolded before our eyes. Occasionally, our eyes would lock into a stare until one of us broke off contact and we would once again continue our meditations. It didn't take me long to realize that the cat and I had a lot in common.

We were doing the same thing. Both of us were taking in our world, drinking in every detail around us. We had opened every pore to the world, so that every sound, every noise, every smell, every taste entered our consciousness. I was as contented, as satisfied, as that cat in the window sill, and rarely have I ever felt more alive or aware of the world than I did at that particular moment.

It was poetry that put me in that cat-like state of mind. I had been studying poetry, reading poetry, writing poetry, listening to poetry presentations during the Third Coast Summer Writing Institute. Immersing my soul in poetry opens up my senses. I see more, smell more, feel more when under the influence of poetry. The grass is a little greener, the sky a little bluer, the rain a little

sweeter when I make room for poetry in my life. I notice things that normally would slip out of my life unobserved, like that fat tabby cat staring at me in the window across the street.

We need to make room for poetry in our schools, to bring this same heightened sense of awareness that is induced by heavy doses of poetry into our classrooms. Most of us are intimidated by poetry, frightened by its form and rhyme schemes. We feel that the rules are locked behind closed doors, and only those select few who have the keys can play the poetry game.

*The grass is a little greener, the sky a little bluer, the rain a little sweeter when I make room for poetry in my life. I notice things that normally would slip out of my life unobserved, like that fat tabby cat staring at me in the window across the street.*

Not true. Anyone who loves to mess around with words can write poetry. Poet Michael Carey points out that anyone is capable of being a good poet, provided that they love words and are willing to work at it.

For those of us who need an additional nudge, activities such as the following, adapted from Barry Lane's *After the End*, are well suited to poetry. The words generated from these exercises tend to fit naturally into poetic form. Try these steps yourself to see what I mean.

1. First, think of a subject you know well. It can be a living thing such as a pet, family member, or best friend. It can also be an inanimate object such as a stuffed animal or your bedroom. The only requirement is that it is something you know and care about deeply. I chose to write about another cat, my pet cat Poco.

2. Next, list five general characteristics about your subject. My quick list looks like this: soft fur, friendly, playful, silly, little.

3. Pair up with a partner. The partners take turns asking questions that bring out concrete details and images about the subject. I had no partner but generated these questions based on my general descriptions:

soft fur- What color fur?

Is it a short hair or long hair? What does the fur feel like?

friendly- How does it show it has a friendly personality?

playful- What playful things does your cat do?

little- Is it a kitten or a full grown cat? How old?

silly- Tell me something silly about your cat.

4. While the partner is asking questions, the author is immediately responding in writing with concrete, specific answers to the questions. Here are my answers to my own questions:

fur- orange, black, and white. Short hair. Fuzzy like a dandelion.

friendly- It follows me around and

## Six Easy Steps to Classroom Poetry

weaves in between my feet. Purrs loudly. Jumps in my lap whenever I sit down.

playful- Darts around like a streak of lightning, hides under papers and in baskets.

silly - Chases its own tail.

5. Write a prose piece about your subject incorporating all the concrete details and images generated by the question and answer period in step four.

My prose piece came out like this:

*I open the door and my new little kitten Poco pops out like a cork from a champagne bottle. She circles and weaves between my feet as we move into the family room, barely missing death by being smooched by my size 11 feet. I sit at my computer to begin my day's work and she is in my lap before I can settle my fanny into the chair. She is a calico and her orange and black fur tickle my bare legs while I work at the word processor. She pushes her head against my fingers as I rub the space between her ears and she breaks into a ferocious fit of purring. She shakes and rattles so much that you can see the vibration rings in the coffee cup that is sitting on my desk.*

*Out of the corner of her eye she sees her long tail flip into the air and she is on it like a hunk of raw fish. She attacks it violently, batting it around and chomping on its tip until she slowly and painfully realizes, with a look of surprise in her eyes, that she*

*has been chewing on a piece of her own body. Not exactly the smartest cat in the world, but I think I'll keep her anyway.*

6. The concrete details and images generated by this activity make the writing that comes out of it an ideal candidate for a poem. By experimenting with line breaks, the prose can easily evolve into a poem. My prose piece turned into this:

### SELF-ABUSE

*By Scott Peterson*

*I open the door to the basement and my new little kitten pops out like a cork off a champagne bottle. She circles and weaves between my ankles, defying death from being flattened by my size 11 feet and attaches herself to my toes like a pair of furry slippers as we move into the kitchen.*

*She is in my lap before my fanny settles into my chair and her orange and black fur tickles my bare legs while I sip my morning coffee. She pushes her head against my fingers as I stroke the space between her ears, breaking into a ferocious fit of purring, rattling and shaking and stirring up little rings of vibrations in the cup on the kitchen table.*

*Out of the corner of her eye she sees her long, black tail flip up in the air and is on it like a hunk of raw fish. She attacks violently, batting it around and chomping on its tip*

*until, with a look of surprise in her eyes, she realizes she is chewing on a piece of her own body.*

Using my process as a model, my students jumped into the poem-writing business themselves. Tom, a fourth grader in my class, wanted to write about his new baby sister, Josie. He began by listing five general characteristics about Josie: smart, sweet, loving, funny and little. Tom's partner then asked the questions about Josie's characteristics; responding to the questions of his partner brought some powerful images to the surface and into Tom's prose draft:

*Baby Josie is smart because she can smile already and she is only one week old and it normally takes a baby six weeks to smile. And when I put a toy bus on her lap she pushes it off. She is sweet because she stares at you for about 5 minutes. She is loving because when I stick my finger in her hand she clutches it tight and sometimes it hurts. She is so little that she could fit in Robyn's doll clothes. And she is funny because she doesn't cry properly. It sounds like a car running out of gas. And she is also funny because her eyes dart around, and she is taking everything in. And she is also funny because she sticks her tongue out at me.*

As Tom and I conferenced about his paragraph, we highlighted the best lines and boiled down the prose so that only the most powerful details and images remained. Out of these details, Tom set up line breaks and came up with his poem:

## Six Easy Steps to Classroom Poetry

*Baby Josie*  
by Tom Crane

*Only one week old and  
can already smile.  
She clutches my finger so hard  
sometimes it hurts.  
Her eyes dart around  
taking everything in.  
She is so small she could  
fit in a doll's clothes.  
When she cries it sounds like a car  
running out of gas.*

*I love my new sister as much as a lion  
loves its cubs.*

Poetry is far too important to leave outside our classroom doors. Our students are loaded with the images, ideas, and concrete details needed to produce poetry. We need only allow a little inspiration, supplemented by a touch of technique, and soon our students will be producing poems faster than we can read them.

### Reference

Lane, B. (1993). *After the end: Teaching and learning creative revision*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

*Scott Peterson is a TC with the Third Coast Writing Project and teaches 4th grade at Mattawan Elementary School in Mattawan, MI. This piece is reprinted from the Third Coast Writing Project Newsletter.*

---

## Teaching the Most Important Things

— continued from p. 18

should read through and look for parts that work, even if there is only one. We can then set aside the rest and head into draft two. Over time, the writing takes shape and the meaning emerges.

There are those rare times when a first draft works. Then the writer can go directly into editing. But those are truly rare occasions. Most of the time, even with considerable mapping and thinking, and even for accomplished writers, the first draft needs revision. First drafts are for the writer, later drafts are for the reader, and one way of knowing you have a final draft is when the ego of the writer has been worked out of the

writing. In an earlier draft of this article, I wrote, “Perhaps we are a measure of our dreams.” It sounds great, doesn’t it, almost Shakespearean. But I didn’t know what it meant. I think I was saying that there seems to be a connection between people who dream large dreams and people whom we consider larger than life. Once I figured that out, I realized it had nothing to do with my article and the reader would not benefit from hearing it.

Selecting only those things that work in a draft is also positive. I tell my students that writing is such a difficult activity that we need all the encouragement we can get.

Selecting what works conserves and focuses our energies on building, not destroying.

These most important things guide my teaching and help me to stay focused. Under them I teach things as large as how to write a book and as small as where to place a comma. I want my students to have their own “most important things” and I hope theirs will be as large.

*Don Gallehr is director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project. This article is reprinted from the Newsletter of the Northern Virginia Writing Project.*