Channeling Emotion
One Way to Make Poems Out of Feelings

William Wordsworth called poetry “the spontaneous overflow of feelings.” Inspired by this definition, teacher Kathy Woods takes her English class through a step-by-step writing process to help the students tap into their feelings and express them in powerful ways. Although, as Woods acknowledges, Wordsworth might not see the classroom as an ideal environment for “recollecting in tranquility,” he would appreciate the beauty of young writers examining their experiences, delving beyond the obvious, and writing honestly.

Kathy Woods

The poet William Wordsworth’s words were my inspiration. Good poetry, he wrote, is “the spontaneous overflow of feelings” originating from “emotion recollected in tranquility” (154). The writer must capture emotions experienced in a significant event, whereas in reality, our feelings may be concealed even from ourselves within untouched memories—they may be tugging at us just below consciousness, they may be intentionally hidden from public scrutiny, or they may be flowing freely with every word and gesture. We all have this abundance of raw material for writing if we could only harness it. I offered my accelerated junior English class a step-by-step writing opportunity to excavate their feelings and shape them into poetry.

I began by asking students to make a list of emotions as the first step in a lesson on becoming poets. (See sidebar: Emotion Prompt). From this list, they were to choose one emotion and, without naming the emotion, describe in detail, with lots of concrete images, a specific time when they experienced that emotion. “What happened? What did you look like? Sound like?” Students wrote intently for about five minutes, showing, I hoped, rather than telling. I know that much of the beauty of poetry is created by the concrete detail that burns an image in the reader’s mind. So we began with emphasis on the detail—the concrete—rather than on the idea.

Limiting the first prompt to one specific experience also focused the writers. Without this direction, fledgling authors are likely to write in general terms, about the beauty of love, for example, asserting “she was always there for me,” rather than doing what the most successful poets do, which is to limit the scope of the poem to one telling situation. But my primary goal was the same as Wordsworth’s: to recapture the strong emotion while at peace. The student who is connected to his writing through emotion will be in a better position to benefit from the lessons in technique that are to follow.

One of my students, Jill, is a tall, lithe varsity basketball player scouted by college teams as a junior. Exuberant and often the center of attention, Jill chose loneliness as her topic for this first prompt:

Blair’s birthday party. I’m surrounded by laughing, smiling faces. Loud chatter rings in my ears. I sit on the couch, smushed between Erica and Cody. I watch the movie, but the noise around me makes the TV inaudible. I think to myself, “Are these people REALLY my friends?” I contemplate this question for a long time. My arms hurt from being pushed against my body. “No, they aren’t my friends. They’re just people, acquaintances. They don’t know me, I don’t know them.” I squeeze myself out of the lock of Cody and Erica and stand up. I say loudly, not only so she’ll hear me but so I’ll be noticed, “Come on, Alyson, it’s time to leave.” We walk over and around a dozen people, bumping into a few as we make our way to the door. I turn back to look at...
Emotion Prompt

1. Make a list of emotions.
2. Choose one of the emotions.
3. Don’t name the emotion but describe in detail and with lots of concrete images a specific time when you experienced that emotion in another person. If you can’t think of a time, make one up.
4. Don’t name the emotion but describe in detail and with lots of concrete images a specific instance when you observed that emotion in another person. If you can’t think of a time, make one up.
5. How does this emotion help people?
6. How does it hurt people?
7. Personify this emotion. If it were a person, what would it do? (Try “emotion + verb.”)
   Example: Fear strings a weak man up like a puppet.
8. Write a simile (x is like y; my love is like a red, red rose).*
9. Write a metaphor (x is y; my love is a red, red rose).*

*For similes and metaphors, consider comparing your emotion to one of the following: illness, body part, historical event, historical figure, plant or tree, man-made structure, geographic feature (mountain, cliff), animal, car, article of clothing, day of week, food, color, fragrance, type of building (church, school), flower, musical instrument, geometric shape, piece of furniture, song, season, appliance or machinery, natural phenomenon (flood, lightning).

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sitting quietly, alone. School was over and we loaded on to the bus. She was the solitary occupant of her seat, every day. Then one day the round table was empty, as well as the park bench. The teacher didn’t call her name on the role. Marching onto the bus in the afternoon, the seat is filled with two people! She is not one of them. She is gone and no one noticed.

Jill’s concrete details—the girl’s thick eyeglasses and plaid skirt, for instance—bring the lonely child to life. She sits alone. The reader aches for her, the ostracized one, only marginally different from one’s self. In common with Jill’s response to the first prompt is the haunting refrain, “No one noticed.” This is the line Jill uses later to anchor her poem.

Now I wanted students to think about this same emotion in a more general way. I asked a series of prompting questions to focus their thinking. Here are some of the questions I asked, followed by Jill’s responses.

How does the emotion help people?

“Loneliness helps people realize how lucky and privileged they are to have true friends.”

How does it hurt people?

“Loneliness hurts people because they have no one to share their joys and triumphs with. No one to cry with on a bad day. It can lead to depression or even death.”

Then I asked students to personify this emotion.

“If it were a person, what would it do?” I asked, providing an example: “Fear strings a weak man up like a puppet.”

Jill’s writing is honest and detailed. She relives an intense feeling, focusing on one specific, moving situation. Jill chose not to share this piece when the timed writing was complete, but many others did share their work.

Now I wanted students to take a step back from this personal account and examine the same emotion in a situation where they act as the observer. Great writers are great observers. I wanted the students to find outside themselves universal experience grounded in the concrete. As students widen their lens, empathy and compassion become part of the mix. Jill certainly displays compassion in her response to the second prompt, while echoing her personal feelings of loneliness:

There was a girl who always sat by herself at lunch. She was kind of funny looking with a crooked nose and thick eyeglasses. There was always a funny smell when she was in the room. She sat at the round table alone with no one to talk to, no one to laugh with, no one to gossip with. At recess she sat on the park bench and twiddled her thumbs or smoothed out her plaid skirt. Still
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Techniques Used in Poetry

Refer to

a) “Any Morning” by William Stafford (Nye, 132)
b) “Eating Together” by Li-Young Lee (Dunning et al., 14)
c) “I Ask My Mother to Sing” by Li-Young Lee (Dunning et al., 106)
d) “Emergency Situation” by Hal Sirowitz (Nye, 12)
e) “Forgive My Guilt” by Robert P. Tristram Coffin (Dunning et al., 101)
f) “My Father in the Stacks” by David Hassler (Nye, 7)
g) “Sooner or Later” by Sam Cornish (Dunning et al., 115)

1. Focus on one specific situation:
   a) lying on the couch in the morning
   b) eating dinner
   c) mother and grandmother singing of memories
   d) mother telling son to wear decent underwear
   e) shooting two birds in the wings
   g) a first funeral

Or contrast two specific situations:
   f) child in father’s study; adult in library meeting father

2. Create images in the reader’s mind. Help the reader picture what’s going on. Examples:
   a) “Just lying on the couch and being happy./Only humming a little”
   b) “brothers, sister, my mother who will taste the sweetest meat of the head”
   c) “the waterlilies fill with rain until they over turn/spilling water into water”
   d) “I dressed you up/as a girl. You were gorgeous. You had curls”
   e) “they ran with broken wings/Into the sea, I ran to fetch them in”
   f) “I’ve grown tall like my father/wandering dark hours of the afternoon/in fields of print, rustling pages”
   g) “Your hands are still in your pockets”

3. Use original language, perhaps similes and metaphors. Examples:
   a) “Little corners like this, pieces of Heaven/left lying around”
   b) “to sleep like a snow-covered road/winding through pines older than him”
   c) “sing like young girls” and “sway like a boat”
   d) “on golden legs slim as dream things” and “ran like quicksilver”
   f) “in fields of print” and “unwritten lives”

4. Choose words for their impact, connotation, and sound. Use harsh sounding words for negative impact. Examples:
   a) “trouble,” “judge,” “monitor,” “act busy,” “hide,” “frown”
   c) “picknickers running away in the grass,” “I love to hear it sung”
   d) “caught,” “reflection on me,” “bad,” “break,” “poor,” “embarrass me”
   e) “with jagged ivory bones where wings should be,” “two airy things forever denied the air!”
   f) “his bookshelves/dwarfed me,” “wandering,” “silence,” “pass each other”

5. A strong image can be repeated effectively, sometimes to end the poem.
   e) “They cried like two sorrowful flutes” and “Those slender flutes of sorrow never cease”
   f) “Sometimes he’d pass me a book/if my hands were clean” and “We pass each other, my hands are clean”

Jill wrote, “Loneliness pushes a man into the storm without an umbrella.”

Finally, students wrote similes and metaphors for their emotions, practicing techniques of poetry. These were Jill’s responses:

“Loneliness is like a long, dark tunnel with no light at the end.”

“Loneliness is a wooden chair in a dusty corner in the back of the room.”

Jill’s responses to these prompts helped give her some ideas and language for her poem. I was especially intrigued by her use of personification, “pushing a man into a storm without an umbrella.” This creative image makes an appearance in the final draft of Jill’s poem.

Pervading the classroom was the quiet intensity of the writer engaged, broken
only when I invited students to share their similes, metaphors, and personifications. They shared eagerly, sometimes with laughter at an especially clever line, sometimes with amazement at a peer’s creativity. This brief discussion touched off some teaching opportunities. For instance, when one student provided “Joy is a disease that infects the entire body,” we talked about connotation and creating a consistent tone, a point I now realize I should have emphasized before students wrote. While a disease may spread as joy does, “disease” and “infect” convey negative connotations foreign to joy. Students grapple with language as they write, and so “they learn to write when they are writing—producing words, working with words, seeing what they say, asking themselves questions, and making choices based upon that seeing and questioning” (Romano 1987, 63).

Jill and her classmates had written now for an entire hour total. They were on their way toward making a poem. But I wanted them to take still another step. Writers write and writers read, and I wanted students to look at some ways published writers work with emotion. I read with students seven short poems that appear in two anthologies available to the class (Dunning et al. 1995; Nye 1999): “Any Morning” by William Stafford, “Eating Together” and “I Ask My Mother to Sing” by Li-Young Lee, “Emergency Situation” by Hal Sirowitz, “Forgive My Guilt” by Robert P. Tristram Coffin, “My Father in the Stacks” by David Hassler, and “Sooner or Later” by Sam Cornish. Each poem conveys strong emotion, yet the tones and situations are varied. We read each poem aloud, then responded to it informally and briefly. The class was intent and moved, silent as they experienced the emotion of the poet, until the last poem, “Emergency Situation,” when the room filled with laughter as the speaker reprimanded her son for his lack of decent underwear.

After reading all the poems, we looked at specific techniques poets use to reach their audiences. (See sidebar: Techniques Used in Poetry). These include the creation of a specific situation; a contrast between two specific situations; the use of concrete, original, and precise language that is chosen for its impact, connotation, and sound; and the repetition of a strong image in the poem. (For example, the first stanza of “My Father in the Stacks,” a poem about the relationship between a father and a son, ends with “Sometimes he’d pass me a book/if my hands were clean.” The second and final stanza repeats that image of the sterile encounter, “We pass each other, my hands are clean” [Nye 1999, 7].) There are, of course, many hundreds of poems available to students and teachers that can be discussed in similar ways. In any case, looking at models is a good idea. Students who read works in the genre in which they are attempting to write are often inspired by their reading. As Natalie Goldberg writes, “When an artist sees a masterpiece, it urges her on to create another one” (1996, 167).

Now students were ready to pull the pieces together, to write poems of their own, using as much or as little of their prewriting as they chose. Jill created the poem “No One” (See figure 1). Empathetic and inspiring, Jill’s final poem uses pieces of each part of the prewriting as well as techniques discussed in the model poems. The “hard pavement” connotes the harsh treatment the poem’s speaker receives from humanity, while God’s sorrow at our indifference compels his tears. “Crying,” “fall,” “no one,” “shuddering,” “drowning,” “damp,” “frigid,” and “alone” are words calculated to convey despair. Connotation, image, and spirit animate Jill’s message. “No one knows the difference” is taken directly from her first and second responses. Even in the first defiant description of her invisibility at Blair’s birthday party, one feels the silent tears Jill finally allows herself to express in her poem. The plight of the socially exiled is derived from her second prompt. To the girl alone at lunch, alone on the bus, no one will show the way, just as no one will show the way to the lone sufferer in the

![Figure 1](image-url)
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frigid torrent of Jill's final draft. "No one offers an umbrella" is a line created with the personification prompt, its image repeated, hauntingly, at the end of the poem, an approach we studied in the model "My Father in the Stacks." Concrete details, precise language, and depth of thought create a moving poem.

Were William Wordsworth an observer in my classroom of twenty-two second-millenium teenagers—focused yet lively in their writing and discussions—I'm not sure he would see this environment as an ideal one for "recollecting in tranquility." But I do believe he would appreciate the beauty of young authors examining their experiences, delving beyond the obvious, and writing with spirit and honesty.

Moving one step at a time, I offered my students a classroom calm that allowed them to tap into and express in powerful ways that "spontaneous overflow of feeling."

References


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