

Dan Gleason
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy
Understanding Poetry
Introductory Poetic Style Challenge

Millie Dies in Style: Crafting Poems in Four Poetic Styles

Abstract:

This exercise helps students learn about poetic style by challenging them to write poetry in different styles. To make stylistic differences most obvious, students write about the same topic in four different ways (casual, formal, depressing, whimsical). Students write poems of 4-10 lines in groups, and then they share their writings with each other. Nearly any topic may be chosen, but the topic should be a bit unusual; I like to use the tragic tale of Millie, a fictional family dog that dies suddenly by falling down an open well, to generate interest. The exercise is a fun activity that challenges students to think about many aspects of poetry (diction, line breaks, metaphor, punctuation) as they write their versions of the poem.

Common Core Standards:

RL.9-10.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

L.9-10.5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Procedure:

I begin the class by asking the class about poetic style: what is it? The students generate some answers, and I get them to focus their responses by asking them to give some traits of the following styles: casual, formal, depressing, whimsical. What would the language be like in each one? What would the poems look like, as text on the page? Would they be orderly? Would they have capitalized words at the start of each line? Would the lines be the same length? What about punctuation: would the poem have standard, insufficient, or extra punctuation? What sort of metaphor would be used in a depressing poem, or a whimsical one?

After these questions give them more to think about, I put them into groups (3 or 4 per group seems to work best) and challenge them to craft some poems in these four styles. Specifically, I ask them to write four short poems, one in each style. I ask students to use an electronic forum (Moodle, in my case) to post their responses. The students should not indicate on their versions which style they are creating.

After most groups have posted their four poems to the forum, I go through the poems and ask the class to guess what version of the poem they think they are reading. I ask students to justify their opinions with lines from the poem that support their ideas. The open-ended aspect of the exercise creates a mildly competitive edge as students argue about which style the poem is, and why.

Materials:

1) Here is the prompt I give students:

Here's the content you'll be describing: on a sunny, windy day recently, your dog, a Pekingese named "Minnie", died by falling into an open well in the park. Her death was sudden and painless.

Your challenge is to package this event in four different stylistic forms: casual, formal, depressing, whimsical. Think about diction and line choices that will give off the impression you want. Think about metaphor, rhyme, punctuation, and enjambment, too. You do not have to use all of the information you know about Minnie's death.

2) Just for fun, here are some examples of student creations, by style:

Casual

So.

One day,

I was walking in the park,

Minnie at my side,

Tongue lolling

Feet trotting.

suddenly

Yelp! Crunch!

Down she goes

To the bottom of the shaft.

Poor dog.

I wonder what's for dinner?

Formal

The wind was rough against my face,

The ground hardened against my feet.

Don't run, Minnie!

I was too late.

I looked down,

My companion crushed,

Body twisted at the bottom.

Minnie perished on impact.

Depressing

Excited barks I hear no more
No more scattered footsteps to the door

Walks in the park all alone
No one to return the ball after its thrown

A lonely leash sits unused
As my heart is forever bruised

Since the day that you fell
down, down the open well.

Whimsical

Pat tap tap
We skipped along in the sun
Whoosh shwoosh
The breeze in our locks
Woof woof
Minnie's sparkling bark

Trip plop
She stumbled into a well.
Oops