

Writing a Group Sonnet

Developed by classroom teachers Louisa Newlin & Gigi Bradford

Lesson Overview

Composing a sonnet as a class or a group can be an effective way of reinforcing understanding of the sonnet's pattern and of paving the way for writing individual sonnets. Starting with a rhyme scheme and working "backwards," adjusting the lines to make sense often yields surprisingly coherent results. This is a good exercise in collaborative learning—and is also noisy and fun.

This module works best after some introductory learning around Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets, especially their forms. The "English Sonnet" module can provide solid setup for this collaborative sonneteering activity if you're short on time.

Time: One to two class periods

What To Do

1. Ask a student to write the rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet on the board, vertically: abab cdcd efef gg. Number the lines.
2. Explain the process by which the students will create a sonnet. First, come up with two pairs of rhyming one-syllable words for the first quatrain (day/dark pray/spark, for example) and place them at the ends of the first 4 lines.
3. Work with the students to compose iambic pentameter lines to precede each of the end rhymes. One person is the scribe who writes the lines on the board. The lines may be nonsense at first, but the group can work to tweak them into making sense (In the process, the end rhymes may be altered).
4. The same process is applied to the second quatrain, the third, and the couplet.
5. Once there are 14 lines on the board, ask students to collectively edit the result.
6. Read the group sonnet chorally.
7. Have students start writing individual sonnets of their own, drawing on their journal writing of the previous classes/lessons for subject matter or theme.

8. Variation: On Google Docs, provide the “skeleton” of a sonnet, and have students work together—on laptops or tablets—to give the sonnet some “flesh.” You can have the whole class typing into the same sonnet Doc, or you can have students work in pairs. Google Docs is a great space for collaborative writing like this.

Assessment

Have students share their group/pair/individual sonnet(s) with the class. Invite commentary on the use of iambic pentameter, rhyme scheme, and other sonnet conventions. Do these sonnets treat the same kinds of topics and ask the same kinds of questions as other sonnets you’ve read? Discuss as a class, and provide textual evidence to support responses.

Check for learning:

- Did the class cooperate in the exercise?
 - Did students demonstrate an understanding of iambic pentameter and of the rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet?
 - Do they understand the internal structure of a sonnet, and that sonnets can be written about a wide range of topics?
 - Were they able to compose a poem that hangs together and which uses natural sounding, unforced language?
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