

NOTE to EDUCATORS:

Master of Arts in Teaching Interns enrolled in CMC completed their Bio Poems assignment in September. One purpose of the assignment, which is suitable for a wide range of age groups and content areas, is to model the activity for teachers who are interested in adapting it to their classes. The instructions for the Fall 2008 Bio Poems assignment are displayed on this page.

September 4, 2008

Your next homework assignment is the **Bio Poem**. I must've missed a few e-mails myself because no one has contacted me about this assignment, which I mentioned briefly in our last class meeting. You weren't required to ask, but.... Surely the Internet is to blame for this lack of curiosity! Or was it the Olympics? Democratic Convention? Hurricane Gustav?

Well, no matter. You may have asked yourself why I would require you to write a poem. After all, we just spent five intensive weeks in class together. We must know one another's basic bio by now. Maybe, but there's a good reason for any thoughtful assignment. Let's review.

Excellence in Teaching Means Getting to Know Your Students.

Pathwise Domain A requires that we organize content knowledge for student learning. When we know our students' educational and cultural backgrounds and experiences, our instruction will be effective and engaging for everyone, even for those whose life paths are radically different from ours. Never assume that your students have backgrounds similar to yours.

In Issues and Principles this summer, we discussed, among other criteria, how to plan our instruction around different learning styles and intelligences. In your methods classes for English, science, social studies, or foreign languages, you studied differentiation of instruction for cultural and linguistic differences. There also are other important factors: gender, socioeconomic status, intellectual and emotional development, cognition, and kinesthetic status.

Have any of you ever wanted to find the "one-size-fits-all" definition of how to teach? It's a quest that reminds me of scientists in search of the Theory of Everything. In education, you'll find the definitive model of teaching in Nowhereland — or perhaps in *Erewhon*, which leads us to another bonus point opportunity: Name the allusion! The first among ye to supply the correct answer by e-mail receives a bonus point! If you've already answered the first challenge, "all's well that ends well," then you're *disqualified* from the *Erewhon* quest. Sorry, but we must share the wealth.

After you realize and accept that there is *No One Way* to teaching excellence, consider this challenge: If you must take into account all the variables of personality, background, status and identity when you design instruction, then how can you uncover sufficient knowledge about each of your students when you are pushing 150-plus learners through the classroom each day?

Your assignment provides an answer: the Bio Poem! It works. Guaranteed.

Students are creative creatures, but too often in the typical public school setting they are bound to the bell and tied to strict rules of behavior. Let's give them — in this case, you are them — a chance to break free, to have some fun, and reveal a bit about themselves.

Now for the warning. Some of you may enter into your homework kicking and screaming by force of the mere mention of the word "poem." By doing so, you shall very quickly transform a fun assignment into a difficult chore. Even for the best among ye, Bio Poems may not seem all that easy. The assignment demands that you slow down and think. It requires that you fit your identity into a specific form and consider the intimidating word "sonnet." So be it. More than ninety percent of you carry an undergraduate English degree into the M.A.T. classroom. No pity! Just do it.

Part One:

8 octave
6 sestet



Your Bio Poem

Your assignment has two parts: the Bio Poem and the Extension Description.

To create your Bio Poem according to form, you must follow a few simple directions — then fly and soar on wings of your imagination! The directions focus on the creation of a pseudo sonnet, which modifies the traditional Italian form into a flexible container for your identity.

Remember, many of the assignments we accomplish in Classroom Management are designed to model situations you are likely to encounter in your own classrooms. Objections on the part of students fit that model.

Sonnet? Here's a definition from *The American Heritage*: "A 14-line verse form usually having one of several conventional rhyme schemes."

Italian sonnet? Think Petrarchan. Here's a definition from *The American Heritage*: "A sonnet containing an octave with the rhyme pattern *abbaabba* and a sestet of various rhyme patterns such as *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*."

So, we have an octave and a sestet to write. As for the fancy rhyme schemes, well.... Forget 'em. Few poets writing today would be willing to tackle the Petrarchan form. I won't ask you to do so.

The underlying idea is to have you consider the meaning of this thing called "poem" and how it differs from other kinds of writing. Remember, as dutiful teachers we are always teaching across the curriculum. Like most traditions in our post post-modern culture, static poetic forms have become passé, faded by changing convention, way out of fashion, and morbidly out-of-date. But a poem worth its salt must have some kind of form, mustn't it?

Here is the 'formula' for you as the Bard:

1. The title of your Bio Poem will be your name. The poem will consist of 14 lines based on the theme of SELF.
2. The first 8 of the 14 lines, the octave, will be subordinate clauses beginning with the relative pronoun "Whose."
3. The last 6 of the 14 lines, the sestet, will be subordinate clauses beginning with the relative pronoun "Who."
4. The octave will focus on your personal identity, using such phrases as whose family, whose favorite, whose parents, and so on. Remember, in the octave you are writing about yourself. In the context of the teacher-student relationship, you as a student are providing information to help your teacher plan effective instructional strategies and productive lessons.
5. In a traditional Italian sonnet, the sestet signals a change in subject matter, hence the change in rhyme scheme and number of lines. In our poem, we will also change subject matter in the sestet. You should move beyond family, habit, and inclination into the deeper realms of self. Let the six lines of the sestet speak directly about any of the physical, psychological, spiritual, cognitive, or kinesthetic aspects that help you define SELF.

Follow any theme about self that comes to you. You may want to use part of the Bio Poem to explain why you've chosen your particular field of expertise to anchor your teaching career. For example, my foreign language students could explain in poetic imagery why they've chosen French or Spanish as their language to teach.

If the Muse visits and you are inspired beyond measure, then go ahead and write a formal Italian sonnet. I promise to be very appropriately impressed! I've written a model to help you visualize the pattern. Imagine that I am your student. Think about all you can find in the poem that would be useful to you as a teacher.

Freddie Elizabeth Alexander Bowles

Whose family hails from old and new lands
Whose first name stems from her father's
Whose middle name links back to her mom's
Whose lineage settled in the eastern delta of Arkansas
Whose favorite foods include breads and pastries
Whose preferred music must have percussion and piano
Whose fav singers cry the blues
Whose *Nachtisch* should be layered with whipped or ice cream

Who speaks or understands four other languages
Who publishes under a *nom de plume*
Who counts over thirty countries in her four passports
Who enjoys dancing and moving
Who relies on a power greater than self
Who loves Teacher Bowles, son Marcus, furry friend Buck-a-roo.

There you have it: 14 lines, one octave, one sestet, one self.

Part Two:

Reflection Application



Extension Description

The Extension Description involves a bit of reflection and a tad of application. Reflect on your students and your content areas. Briefly describe how you would adapt this assignment to fit one of your classes. Explain how you would include it in your plan for instruction. Identify problems and opportunities. Remember, it's important to adapt and adjust lessons to meet the capabilities of your students.

For example, you may want to instruct your students to begin every line with "who," rather than "whose." You could choose another form with a different number of lines. You may decide to have your students focus on a specific theme such as sports, ethnicity, or hobbies. You could also direct them to write about their family and their experiences in school.

Earlier in my career, when I taught the German language, I would direct my students to write poems to anchor a descriptive adjective exercise for a lesson about family. They could write either about themselves or about one of their family members. I would also shorten the line requirement. For a Level One class, I would use a gap-fill format because so many students struggled with syntax. The activity provided me with background information about my students and also addressed Pathwise Domain C, "Teaching for Student Learning." The poem exercise could also be adapted to an exercise calling for a description of the student's house, which would give me an idea of their socioeconomic background. For a Level One class, I would provide a Word Bank for students to use in their poems.

Happy sonnets to each of you!