

Notebook strategies to help generate and revise poems

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Many teachers launch poetry units in April to honor National Poetry Month, so here are five notebook strategies that can support your poetry unit. As you read through them, you'll find that these also fit or could be adapted to other units of study.

In fact, it's not a bad idea to teach the same notebook strategy in multiple units of study—that demonstrates how valuable the strategy is in the “real world,” perhaps working across genres, subject matter, audiences, purposes, etc.

Keep in mind that writing is not a linear process, so activities like brainstorming, list-making and writing “discovery drafts” (Lucy Calkins' term) can be useful in collecting ideas, nurturing them and revising them, too. When applicable, I've given ideas for how each strategy can help in different stages of the writing cycle.

Recall significant memories.

Do some *brain dumping* in your notebook about a memory. Don't try to write a poem yet, just try to record as many ideas, images, descriptions, reactions, etc., that you can recall. Write as fast as you can, without editing or censoring yourself. You may find that the mere act of writing helps awaken parts of the memory

that otherwise escape you. You can write this as a prose entry, or a series of bullet points, or a messy brainstorming list, or any combination of ways.

Doing this activity in the early “collecting” or “nurturing” stages of the writing cycle can help poets uncover an angle or aspect of the memory to focus on, or simply generate the words and ideas that can later be crafted into a more formal draft. As a revision tool, this strategy can help uncover more specific details and concrete images that can replace vague or abstract writing in a draft.

Listen to music.

Turn on some music, preferably something without lyrics that might distract you. Close your eyes and listen for a while, until you are fully present in simply listening to the music. Let the music conjure images in your mind...what do you “see” in your mind as you listen? What is the music doing (i.e., bouncing, tingling, shouting)?

Open your eyes and record in your notebook everything you imagined while listening.

This activity is easiest to use for generating ideas at the beginning of a poetry study, because it seems to open the imagination and get us thinking outside of the box of everyday experiences (not that it is bad to write about everyday experiences, of course). But listening to music and thinking about the changes in it has helped me revise poems, too. I might notice, for example, that a fast tempo in music elicits a happy feeling in me as a listener and decide to use mostly one-syllable words and short lines in my poem to quicken its pace and lighten its message.

Respond to an image.

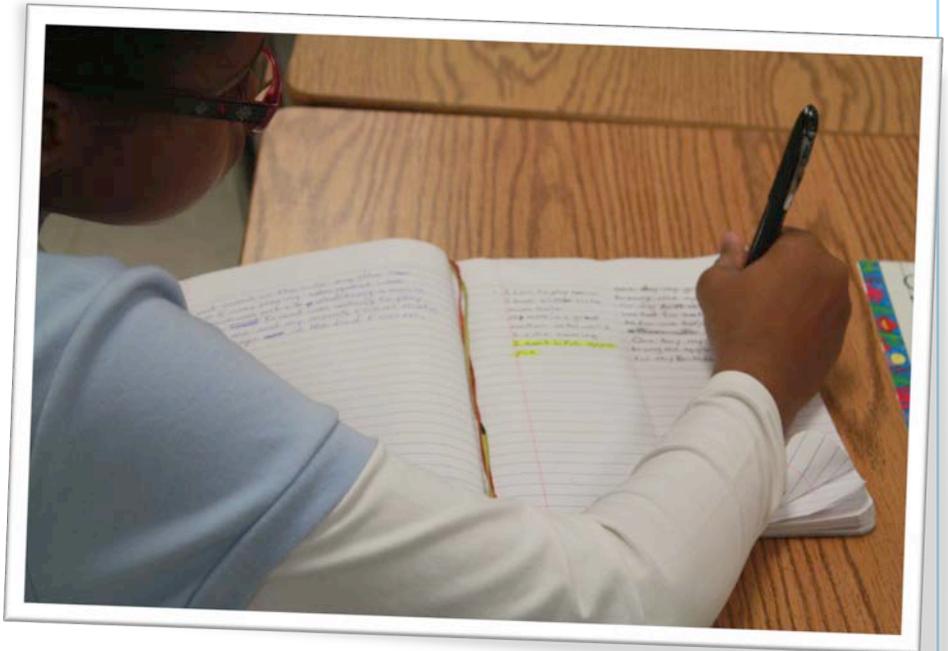
Find an image to observe closely. It might be a photograph from your life, an image from a magazine or newspaper, or a painting or other piece of 2-D visual art. Study the image. Start by writing exactly, literally, what

you see but then let your mind wander (e.g., *blue and purple background—dark blue, almost black at the top lightens to a violet pink at the bottom, possibly a sky at sunrise or sunset...*) Let your imagination fill in the blanks, imagine the rest of the scene/image, what is going on just beyond the boundaries of the image. What is the mood? What do you imagine the message is? Brain dump about the image—force yourself to write a few minutes beyond when you think you’re “done.”

Much like the memory exercise above, this activity can help uncover something to write about or, in revision, uncover some important details that were missing from your original draft. If you’ve already drafted a poem about your 10th birthday, for example, but then study a photograph or two from the event, you will likely discover new material to add.

Hunt for strong verbs.

Pull out a cookbook, a magazine like *Popular Mechanics*, the Sports section of the newspaper or a how-to manual of some kind. Skim through it looking for action verbs that appeal to you. Make a list in your notebook of the interesting verbs you discover.



If using this strategy in revision, choose a text that is unrelated to your topic. For instance, reach for a gardening magazine to help you with your poem about grandma’s chicken noodle soup rather than going to a cookbook. Poets, after all, are gifted at looking beyond the obvious.

Sketch a character or location.

You can literally sketch or simply write a descriptive list or paragraph. You may find that this exercise is a combination of the memory and image/art strategies above. The goal is to

get an image or enough words on paper to help someone else see what you see/remember about a specific person or location. This entry often looks like a list—at least at first—though you can take it a step further by also brain dumping a paragraph or two in response after you’ve generated a thumbnail drawing or list. That will help you uncover thoughts and feelings to complement the images you have.

Like other strategies presented here, this activity can generate “poem-worthy” ideas early in a unit of study or help deepen and improve content during revision.

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The Indiana Partnership for Young Writers, a program of the Butler University College of Education, provides ongoing and in-depth professional development in the teaching of reading and writing to teachers in grades K-8. The Partnership is committed to inquiry-based workshop teaching that sustains students’ lifelong academic and workplace success.

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