Writing Ourselves Into Existence

a comprehensive approach for integrating Performance Poetry into the classroom

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Writing Ourselves Into Existence

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written and edited by:

kahlil almustafa

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INTRODUCTION: Using Pre-Writing Strategies

Are your students having trouble writing? When prompting students to write, one of the worse things an educator could do is fail to first properly engage the young minds that they are attempting to mold. I made this mistake often in my early years as a Teaching Artist. I had the freshest, dopest prompts you’ve ever heard of. When I instructed my students to “write” it didn’t work. First, you have to stir up the pot.

Any writer can tell you, staring at a blank piece of paper and not knowing what to say is highly frustrating. The hardest part of writing is getting started. Pre-writing activities are a great way to spark ideas to write about.

There are many different pre-writing activities you can use. This is an excellent opportunity to engage other intelligences. Pre-writing activities can help students think about ideas in a new way, dig deeper into topics, and brainstorm. No one method is better than another. Use whichever method is best for the prompt.

For the I Am Poem Lesson, the pre-writing worksheet is a simple list of words descriptive words. I’ve successfully used it with students who were in their first days of middle school to those writing their college essays. After choosing five words which best describe them, students walk around the room introducing themselves using their words. Now they are ready to write.

There are many ways to arrive at a prompt. You can begin with an idea, an existing text or generated by the students themselves. If you want to prompt the students, have them engage with something: a poem, a quote, a t-shirt, a song, a photo, anything that will
inspire a problem-solving and dialogue. Ask them questions. Have them respond. Ask them more questions. Question the questions. Provoke. Poke. When it is time to write, you will know. Students will be bursting to add their voice to the conversation. Assign the prompt. Give them a time limit. Then give them permission to write.

LESSON: I Am Poem

NCTE Standards: 12: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will have a hands-on experience of the three most important skills in a poetry performance workshop: Writing, Performing and Listening.

✦ Students will voice a declarative statement about themselves.
✦ Students will review what it means to be a good listener.
✦ Students will be learn about the listening as a key to creating a safe space.
✦ Students will free-write an “I Am” poem.

MATERIALS

✦ “I Am” Pre-Writing Worksheet
✦ Student Text: “I Am,” by Rontreisha Jones

ACTIVITY

1. WORKSHEET: Have each student circle five words which best describe them, then write them in the boxes across the top. Students should be given permission to write words not found on the list.
2. WALK THE ROOM: Students walk around the room introducing themselves to as many people as possible using their 5 words. They take turns saying, “I am . . .”
followed by their 5 words. When students are speaking, they should speak in a clear voice. When students are listening, they should listen for the poet’s truth and create a safe space for their expression. Remind students not to respond negatively. For example, when a student declares, “I am intelligent,” no student should respond by saying, “no you’re not.” Begin by asking volunteers to come to the front of the class and modeling.

3. PERFORMING: Have the entire class say, “I am . . .” followed by one of their adjectives. Practice with volume: SOFT/BIG VOICE.

4. FREE-WRITE: Students should write an “I Am” poem using their five words as inspiration. Tell a story about a time you were “brave.” What makes you a “friendly” person?

ASSESSMENT

After the class walks the room debrief students by asking: 1) How did it feel to express themselves with their words? 2) Did other students say words that surprised you? 3) How did it feel when someone choose the same word as you did? Point out that this is the basic process of performance poetry. We write. We share. We listen. It may be difficult at times to share. Students will have an opportunity to declare who they are which may be different from how we see them.

HOMEWORK

Read “I Am” by Rontreisha Jones. Revise your “I Am” free-write into a poem with stanzas.
I Am Poem as a Poetic Rites of Passage

Poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement ... says heaven and earth in one word ... speaks of himself and his predicament as though for the first time.

- Christopher Fry

Writing an “I Am” poem is a poetic Rites of Passage. An “I Am” poem is an opportunity for young people to declare themselves, to share with the world their perceptions of themselves. This is vitally important as most of us experience ourselves through the real and imagined perceptions of others. This makes it just as important that students spend this lesson focusing on creating a safe space for other students to express themselves.

The lesson begins by completing the “I Am” handout. Students choose five words that best describe them. Students may also write-in words not found on the list. Some students use this opportunity to begin speaking metaphorically. The most creative example was a seventh grade student who wrote, “Panel five is out of service, please check back in 24 hours.”

Once the students have selected and written their five words, they safely walk around the room introducing themselves using their five words. For example, “I am intelligent, considerate, nerdy, radical, and a leader.” It is important to emphasize listening before you begin. Have the students review what makes good listening: not speaking, making eye contact, active listening, etc. In poetry workshops, we listen for people to tell their truth. Listening is the most important part of this activity. Make sure no students responds by saying, “No You’re Not,” or any other discouraging remarks. This is what is meant to create a safe space for young people to explore their expression. To bring this point home, I ask the young people to think about a time when someone discouraged them from being who they saw themselves to be, and think about a world where everyone is encouraged to express themselves as they see themselves.

Teachers should walk the room with the students and share their five words, keeping the students circulating through the space. In small groups, you can go until everyone
has introduced themselves to each person. In a larger group, you should stop once the students begin to lose focus and send them back to their seats.

Throughout this lesson, I remind students that we are doing each of the three most essential aspects of performance poetry: writing, performing and listening. Once students are back in their chairs, we debrief. Did students like this exercise? How was it choosing five words? What did it feel like to repeatedly declare your five words to your classmates? What did they find surprising? What happened when someone said a word that you shared? Did you find out something new about the way someone perceived themselves?

After our debrief, we read, “I Am,” a student poem by Rontreisha Jones (7th grade). This poem is a clear declaration of uniqueness, filled with simple, accessible metaphors. As they read, students should highlight lines that stand out to them. Discuss students’ favorite lines of poetry and why.

Now, we are ready for our free-write, this time for at least seven minutes. Our prompt is, “I Am.” It may take some time to get everyone started. Remind students to refer to their five words for inspiration. If you wrote bold, tell a story about a time when you acted bold. If you wrote talkative, try to write a lot of words so that the poem sounds talkative.

Our last steps are to share our free-writes and receive feedback from our classmates. I almost always allow students to share free-writes from their desks. Once their read, prompt the class to give them warm applause. We are now ready for our one-word feedback. This is all warm feedback at this point. Have the student who read, write some of these words on their page to inspire them later on when they revise their poems for homework.
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**I am worksheet:** Circle 5 words that describe you best and write them in the boxes

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I Am

by Rontreisha Jones (PS 122, Jackson Heights, Queens)

1
I Am the pen to your paper
Scribbling words of knowledge
I Am the tissue to your tears
Wiping away the pain and sorrow

5
I Am the rock that cannot be broken
Standing tall and proud I will
Rise above the rest

I Am not just an image in a mirror
When you walk past you won’t see

10
I will not be a disconnected phone
Where you can’t hear my thoughts and ideas

I Am the red in a mist of blues
I Am the voice to a mute city
I Am the sunshine to a shadowed town

15
I Am the cute little Gucci bag
That goes with everything you wear

I Am not just some rug that you walk on
Or an old pair of jeans that you
Think went out of style and I will

20
Most definitely not be just some
Speck on your wool sweater

We are alike you and I but right now
You don’t see and one day you
And I will become a we and be the

25
United one in a society of 2’s
Teachers,

Throughout my ten plus years as a Teaching Artist, I have had the opportunity to learn from so many excellent educators. I have also had the opportunity to partner and grow with visionary organizations. Thank you for helping me Move The Class.


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