



Smithsonian Institution

MUSEUM on Main Street

Water/Ways **Poetry Lessons Summary**

Recognizing the value of the humanities within the *Water/Ways*, the Museum on Main Street has created a package that will allow your students to explore their own water stories through the exhibit. These lessons engage students in discovering the various aspects of water through poetry. Using science, myth, ceremony, history and values, these lessons encourage an in-depth understanding of water and how they relate to it, expressed within their own writing.

The lessons containing detailed instructions and example poems for facilitation of use can be found at <http://www.museumonmainstreet.org/> and are lessons geared to all grade levels. It is our hope that teachers will have an opportunity to share the poems that their students write beyond the walls of their classroom and that a water story discussion, prompted by poetry, can begin in our communities, our states, and our nation.

Lesson: Water is Weird – Making Sense (Poetry) Out of Water

Exhibit theme: Our World is Water

Lesson theme from exhibit: Water is Weird

Grade level: 1-12 (lesson is divided into grade appropriate settings)

Using works from poets Langston Hughes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Eve Merriam, students will think about water in terms of the sensations it elicits around us. They will identify how water is portrayed in poems with certain words and images, and what sort of emotions are evoked as a result. Students will then create similes to complete water sensory sentences and will use these images to write their own definition of water, attributed with their own personal experiences and connections to water. The new definitions of water will be the basis of their own sense poems on water.

Objectives:

- Explore sensations water evokes within us
- Articulate, using similes, images for each sense as associated with water
- Create an alternative definition for water using new imagery
- Share new definitions of water

Lesson: States of Water as Poetry – Playing with Poem Structure

Exhibit theme: Our World is Water

Lesson theme from exhibit: Water is Weird

Grade level: 7-12 (with adjusted shortened lesson for grades 1-6)

Using Frank Lloyd Wright's design of Fallingwater, students will learn that art and design allow structures to be built that mimic the natural world, and will make connections between structures of poems and the three states of water. Reading the first chapter of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,



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students will make associations between the use of punctuation to change a reader's voice and the actions of water molecules as it moves through its three states. They will then take Lisa Jarrot's "They Loved Paperclips" and re-structure it to mimic their visualizations of water and its states. Students will also choose a body of water and write a poem, highlighting the movement of water in their chosen location.

Objectives:

- Draw a connection between the different states of water and writing
- Experiment with creative uses of punctuation and placement of words to visually mimic the water changes states
- Attempt to apply a scientific principle to poetic form
- Understand that water and the science of water can be an inspiration for artists and writers
- Expose students to different artistic media surrounding water
- Ask if the scientific world can be a template for artistic work

Lesson: Carving Out a Poem – Working with Text to Create a Blackout Poem and a Found Poem

Exhibit theme: Source

Lesson theme from exhibit: Water Carves out a Landscape

Grade level: 7-12

Students will use their creativities to illustrate how writing structure can mimic natural landscapes, and how nature can inspire art. Just like water carves out a particular landscape, students will manipulate text to carve out their own poems. Taking excerpts from "A River Runs Through It" and "Beast of the Southern Wild," students will take the "water" of their pen and carve out a new "landscape" of the text, creating both a blackout poem and a found poem.

Objectives:

- Draw connections between water movement, its ability to carve out a landscape, and writing
- Experiment with creative uses of manipulating text to create a blackout poem and a found poem
- Attempt to apply a scientific principle to a poetic form
- Understand that water and the science of water can be an inspiration for artists and writers
- Expose students to different artistic media surrounding water
- Ask if the scientific world can be a template for artistic work

Lesson: Home is where the water is or isn't, understanding water in different contexts – Creating a Letter Poem

Exhibit theme: Source

Lesson theme from exhibit: Home is Where the Water is

Grade level: 7-12



After reading “To the Desert” and “Letter Written in Black Water and Pearl,” students will experiment with the letter format as a poem and discuss what this structure allows the writer to accomplish. Exploring different communities and the experiences had regarding water (or the lack thereof), students will write a letter poem to a body of water or water experience with which they are not familiar, such as living on an island, or a letter from the ocean to the desert. In doing so, students will draw on their own emotions that result from viewing water experiences that are not their own, and will effectively represent those emotions in the letter poem.

Objectives:

- Draw a connection between the communities and their different cultures surrounding water
- Experiment with creative uses of letter writing
- Expose students to different views surrounding water and its influence on lifestyle depending on the community in which a person lives

Lesson: Writing a Reverence for Water – Creating Origin Poems for Water

Exhibit theme: Source

Lesson theme from exhibit: Water Inspires Our Humanity

Grade level: 7-12

Water is a fundamental part of life and in this lesson, students will learn about and discuss ceremonies and instances where water has taken on the qualities of reverence, such as the blessing of a naval fleet, the power of a hurricane, or a baptism. After discussing images such as these and the role water has in them, students will read a section of T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” paying particular attention to images of creation in the text. Students will also read two origin story poems, exploring how each author understood the creation or beginning in each of the poems. They will then choose a body of water, an element of water, or water-related event and write its creation story in their own origin poem.

Objectives:

- Explore water from a humanities perspective
- Look at water with a certain level of reverence
- Write about water in a new way that replicates its power
- Create an origin poem about a body of water or a water-related event

Lesson: Looking Out on Immigration – Letting the Journey Speak (writing persona poems)

Exhibit theme: Flow

Lesson theme from exhibit: Water Connects/Water Divides

Grade level: 7-12

Water has been and continues to be crucial to immigration to the United States, and in this lesson, students will discuss instances where water has connected people, such as through immigration or



trade, and where it has divided people, whether culturally or politically. Students will look at images of the Statue of Liberty, discuss its history and purpose, and what the Statue of Liberty means to them. After reading “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, and watching Karen Finneyfrock’s “The Newer Colossus,” two poems of the Statue of Liberty, students will compare and contrast their personal connections to the Statue of Liberty to those presented in the poems. They will then write their own persona poems in the point of view of an inanimate object. The poems will either be from the point of view and in the voice of the State of Liberty, reflecting on water-based immigration to the US, or students will research an immigration story based on water (a general immigration story, a specific historical story, or a personal family story) and choose an inanimate element of the story to act as the point of view and voice of the poem. Such objects could be a boat, the water, a trunk of items, and more.

Objectives:

- Explore concepts surrounding immigration to the United States
- Discuss the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of immigration
- Look at how water has influenced immigration
- Write on the image of the Statue of Liberty and its relationship to immigration
- Research an immigration story
- Create a personal poem on the theme of immigration

Lesson: Working with Water: Writing Personal Narrative Poems

Exhibit theme: Quench

Lesson theme from exhibit: Harnessing the Power of Water

Grade level: 7-12

Students will study the power of water in relation to the industries that revolve around it. After reading the poems “At the Fishhouses” by Elizabeth Bishop and “The Fisherman” by Anis Mojgani, and discussing the work and voice of the fishermen, students will research a water-based occupation through images, film, and other narratives. With a better understanding of what the work entails, what a day would be like, and how the occupation relates to water, water scarcity, or improving water conditions, students will write a persona poem in the voice of a person with that occupation. They will use their senses to create a portrayal of this person and the experiences that relate to that occupation.

Objectives:

- Understand how water is an industry
- Explore water-related employment
- Create a persona poem that places students in the position of the worker



Lesson: Telling Your Water Story

Exhibit theme: Finding Comfort and Purpose in Water

Lesson theme from exhibit: Evoking Personal Stories

Grade level: 7-12 (with adaptations for grades 1-6)

Objectives:

- Identify and list the effects and connections to water in students' lives
- Determine events when water has influenced students' lives and communities
- Create a personal water story in free verse poem from a list

People often have very strong personal connections to water, and water can often be a conduit to telling a story. In this lesson, students will begin by reading George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes, discussing the impacts the poems being created from lists, and how that form adds interest to the poems. Students will then discuss where water exists within their own community and lives, and what memories and stories students have involving water. Personal water stories in poems that will be studied include clips of Matthew Leavitt Brown's narrative poem "River Sonnet," which uses images of the Mississippi to connect to his personal life, Porsha Olayiwola's poem "Water," connecting the inability to swim to a history of slavery, and Patricia Smith's persona poem "34," which recounts the imagined voices of residents of a nursing home in post-Katrina Louisiana. Students will then create a water-related list with answers to questions regarding their story; who is connected with their water story, where it takes place, and what it entails. Using these lists, students will write their own water story in free verse, choosing items from their list and including metaphors and imagery to tell their story. Younger students can choose places of water within the community as a class, asking students to tell the story of a memory tied to that place in the form of a small poem.

Lesson: An Ode to Water – Understanding Sacredness

Exhibit theme: Finding Comfort and Purpose in Water

Lesson theme from exhibit: Culture and Heritage at the Water's Edge

Grade level: 1-12 (with adaptations for differing grades built in)

Sacred traditions surrounding water, and reverence given to water is prevalent in many cultures. These beliefs have been challenged through contemporary uses and misuses of water. From a reverent framework of water, students will explore sensory experiences of water and the emotions connected with those experiences. Older students will read Sherman Alexie's "The Powwow at the End of the World" while younger students will read *Go Home, River* by James Magdanz, both keeping in mind the sacredness of water while reading. Students will then write an ode to water, referencing water in any situation.



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Objectives:

- Explore sacred traditions surrounding water
- Explore cultural views surrounding water
- Explore the implications of the use of water
- Understand what an ode is
- Write an ode

Lesson: Poem-ing the Research

Exhibit theme: Water is Eternal

Lesson theme from exhibit: Water is Eternal?

Grade level: 7-12

After reading three different poems revolving different water issues, students will study the connection between newspaper articles and poetry, and discuss the subject of poetry addressing a scientific or research issue, as well as what roles fact and fiction play in poetry. They will read the *New York Times* pairing of Kathryn Starbuck's poem "Trout" with the article "In Yellowstone, Killing One Kind of Trout to Save Another" to discuss how the poem and the article relate and what the advantage is of looking at a particular issue through the lens of poetry. Students will be given various newspaper article on water issues, locally or otherwise, and will choose on that interests them, underlining quote or lines that stand out to them. After a five-minute free write on the article, students will use their reactions to the article and what they underlined to create a poem on the topic.

Objectives:

- Explore research surrounding water and threats to water
- Understand a link between newspaper articles and poetry
- Create a poem from a news article

Lesson: Poem-ing the Facts

Exhibit theme: Water is Eternal

Lesson theme from exhibit: Water is Eternal?

Grade level: 7-12 (adaptation for grades 1-6 at the end)

Students will read poems from Patricia Smith's book *Blood Dazzler*, which are based on data from the National Hurricane Center and explore how research regarding water can connect to poems, and what story that information can tell in poetry. They will research water-related information and write a poem based on that information, including their own emotional reactions and personal connections to that water issue. Teachers can tie in the factual information from the exhibit or tie in the students' poems to



a larger social science research paper that incorporates water. Younger students can create poem-stories using their completed sensory statements that they generated based on water facts.

Objectives:

- Explore research surrounding water
- Discern scientific facts from the research
- Understand how a narrative can be created from a series of facts
- Create a poem from a news article

Lesson: Writing the Political Poem

Exhibit theme: It's Our Water

Lesson theme from exhibit: Spurred to Action

Grade level: 7-12 (with adaptation for grades 1-6 at the end)

Issues relating to water can generate a great deal of activism, and this lesson will prompt students to discuss the role of poetry and art in activism. They will listen to Steve Earle's song "Gulf of Mexico" regarding the BP oil spill and read or watch Sara Brickman's "Letter from the Water at Guantanamo Bay," exploring how each piece talks about water and addresses the issue in from an activist perspective. Students will themselves identify and research a political issue surrounding water that has an activist campaign and write a manifesto in the form of a political poem based on the issue they chose, making a strong statement on that issue either from their own point of view or that of the water. Students in younger grades will learn about a political water story in the form of a song, poetry, or images, and share their thoughts and feelings on the story. They will discuss what they would do to fix the issue and will then write a "new" water story in the form of a poem.

Objectives:

- Explore water issues from an activist standpoint
- Discern facts from activist issues
- Understand how poetry can be a form of activism
- Discuss if art is an effective form of activism
- Create a political poem

Lesson: Voicing Your Water/Way – A Community Sonnet

Exhibit theme: What's Next? Research Your Water/Ways

Lesson theme from exhibit: Understanding Your Water/Ways

Grade level: 1-12



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Students will begin with identifying the water ways within the area that mean something to their community and will research these bodies of water, asking questions with an interdisciplinary approach. After exploring the poetic form of the sonnet, they will choose one element of their research to focus on and create a poem about the body of water they have selected. Students can base their sonnet on the classic Shakespearean form of the sonnet or the contemporary spoken word style, but focus on actualizing the idea of “voicing the water” in order to create a poetic song of the community. Students will then audio record their sonnets and poems in order to create a soundtrack of the community’s water/ways, which could be added to music, shared with members of the community, and even played in conjunction with the *Water/Ways* exhibit.

Objectives:

- Research local water ways
- Find historical and contemporary events and people associated with local water ways
- Present that information in a sonnet
- Create a collection of poetry (as a class) representing the community’s differing water stories
- Publish the collection