WHAT’S IN THE JAR? A POETRY LESSON PLAN.

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Time: ~1½ hours
Grade Level: Grade 5 and 6.
(Kids are set in groups of 4 to 5).

Materials: pencils, paper, magazines
Equipment: A glass jar.
Staff: 1 poet

This lesson accompanies the DIY Cloud Chamber activity¹, where both revolve around initial discussions over “what is in the jar?” This jar, to all intents and purposes, appears to be empty, but the various poetry exercises shown here are meant to encourage students to imagine possibilities, realistic or not. Also note that in the SCLS fieldtrip, students will alternate between the science and poetry activities.

1. Set Up before Start (~10 minutes)

Put pens and pencils out on the tables. You’ll also need long strips of paper, glue sticks, construction paper (8x10), scissors, and a variety of appropriate magazines.

2. Imagining the Jar’s Contents (5 minutes)

You show the class an empty glass jar (or there is a slide with an empty jar). After the section where the science instructor asks what, from a scientific perspective, is inside the jar (space, molecules, etc.), you ask the class what, from a poetry perspective, could be inside the jar. Essentially, you’re asking what they can imagine inside the jar. Give a few examples—anything from a thousand sour gummy worms, to Beyoncé and Jay-Z in front of the Mona Lisa, to a herd of endangered black rhinos.

Note that the students are likely to imitate your examples; i.e. if you say a thousand gummy worms, they might say they imagine some kind of candy or chocolate in the jar. It’s probably best to offer a few varied examples.


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After giving example, ask a few students to tell you what they imagine being in the jar. You can write these on the board.

The general idea is that they can imagine anything in the jar.

**3. Defining Poetry (5 minutes)**

Ask the group if they’ve written poems in class. You might get them to do a show of hands. Also ask if students have written poems outside of class, and ask what kinds of poems they’ve written (they may have written particular forms).

Have a slide that reads “What is poetry?” Pose this question to the students, and ask a few of them to tell you what they think poetry is. If they mention something like rhyme, you might tell them that it’s important to poetry in general but is not essential to every poem. Note some common devices and characteristics, but…

…For the purposes of this workshop, poetry is defined as “pretty much anything you want it to be.”

**4. Collaborative Poem! (30 minutes)**

For this exercise, each student will write a line, and they’ll be combined into stanzas and then a poem. Start out by establishing that in prose there are sentences and paragraphs, but in poems there are lines and stanzas. You could do this by asking if anyone knows what a “line” of poetry is, and then expanding on a student’s answer to explain the concept to the class.

1. Hand out long strips of paper (pens and pencils should already be on tables), one to each student. Have each student write out a line about what they imagine being in the jar. You may want to give examples that involve whatever is in the jar doing something or looking a certain way—the gummy worms might squirm, Beyoncé might sing on Mars, endangered black rhinos might swim in a swimming pool. Common subjects mentioned by students have included money, pop stars, and candy. Students writing their individual lines should work quietly. You and the other instructors can move around the room, reading the students’ lines and offering prompts to those who are struggling.

2. After the students have written their lines, have them work together in their groups (4-5 students at a table in the lab) to arrange their lines into a stanza. You might suggest ways to choose the order of lines for a stanza, suggesting they choose the “wildest” line to start or finish the stanza. They usually manage to accomplish this quickly amongst themselves.

3. After the groups have arranged their stanzas, you’ll help them arrange the stanzas into a poem. One way to choose the order is to ask which group can tell you an interesting fact. The group that tells you an interesting fact first goes first, and so on. Have the first group lay out their stanza line by line, then select the second group, third, etc. The poem should stretch around the room with the ends of the lines touching end-to-end. You might want to mark the last line of each stanza if you’re going to type the poem up later.
4. Assign a student—or a few students—to read out the poem to the class. Have the class choose a title for the poem before they read the poem out. You could also, potentially, have them choose a title after they’ve heard the entire poem. Usually the title ends up being some sort of various of “What is in the Jar?”

5. Poetic Devices and Spoken Word (10 minutes)

Explain the idea of a poetic device to the class, and ask them to define: rhyme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. Help them if they need it, and write the definitions on the board.

Show the class a video of someone performing a slam poem, and tell them to listen for examples of rhyme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. After the video, ask them to give examples of each poetic device’s usage in the poem, and talk a bit about the effects of the devices.

6. Poetry Collage Activity (35 minutes)

We will then guide the students in making collage poems. These are good in the sense that it keeps their hands busy, but also in that cutting and pasting various words is also a good way to emphasize certain poetic devices, and may also help in how they are read (i.e. larger bold fonts emphasize words in certain ways).

Show the class examples of collage poems—poems made with words and pictures cut out of magazines—that have been previously made (see below for an example). You could potentially allow them to use a picture of something in place of the word for it, as it can be difficult to find large (in terms of font size), interesting, or specific words in the magazines. The example collage poems should try to employ rhyme, onomatopoeia, and alliteration, but they could be missing one or two devices. You can read the examples to the class or ask students to read them. Ask the students to point out the uses of the devices, or if there’s a particular device missing from a poem. Make sure they know that some of them will be asked to read out their poems.

Next, hand out construction paper, scissors, magazines, and glue sticks out to tables. Give students some time to construct their poems, warning them when they have 15, 10, 5 minutes left. Instructors can move about the room helping students with their poems. You may want to suggest possible subjects for their poems, such as references to the science activity, and expansion to their ideas around the jar, or even just things they like. Potentially, the instructor could provide different, more complex prompts to help the students expand the subjects of their poems from soccer and what they had to lunch to a person they admire or a place they like. You could also introduce ideas such as narrative poetry, ode, free verse, or haiku, depending on the level of the class.

Leave a few minutes for clean-up after the activity as the tables will likely be scattered with paper clippings.
7. Performance Time! And Q&A (10 - 20 minutes)

Invite students to perform their poems in front of the class, either in their normal reading style or imitating the spoken word artist. Their teachers might also have plans for them to perform or display their poems back at school.

Ask the students if they have any questions for the instructors, about science or poetry, or writing in general.