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Cutting Up Poems

LESSON

1

Lesson Learning Objective

In this lesson, students will practice close reading skills, annotation, and building their interpretation of a poem. In addition, this activity will help students become more comfortable reading and working with poems.

Background

I have been obsessed with the idea of deconstruction not only as a means of thinking about structure but also as a way to encourage students to read closely for a long time. The idea for this lesson was shaped by the idea of working on a puzzle. How do the pieces fit together to make a whole picture? What piece fits where? What's the process for figuring out which piece fits where?

Susan Barber
Susan

From Inspiration to Reality in Susan's Classroom

The first time I did this lesson I experimented with the poem "The Crossing" by Ruth Moose (Poetry Foundation, n.d.a). As a high school teacher, I love this poem because it has so many implications for my seniors who are thinking about what comes next after graduation. The poem consists of four sentences, so the length for the task is perfect. We read the first sentence together so students would have some type of context for the poem.



Scan the QR code to read Ruth Moose's poem "The Crossing."

qrs.ly/avgayak



Ruth Moose's 'The Crossing' brings this image to mind.

[iStock.com/farbenrausch](https://www.istock.com/farbenrausch)

Then I gave student groups individually cut words for the next three sentences in three separate baggies. The goal was twofold: Students construct individual sentences, then determine the order of the sentences. Hearing the students talk about the poem as they were putting it together was music to an English teacher's ears. After students checked themselves, I gave them a few minutes to discuss the poem before answering the following reflection questions in their journal:

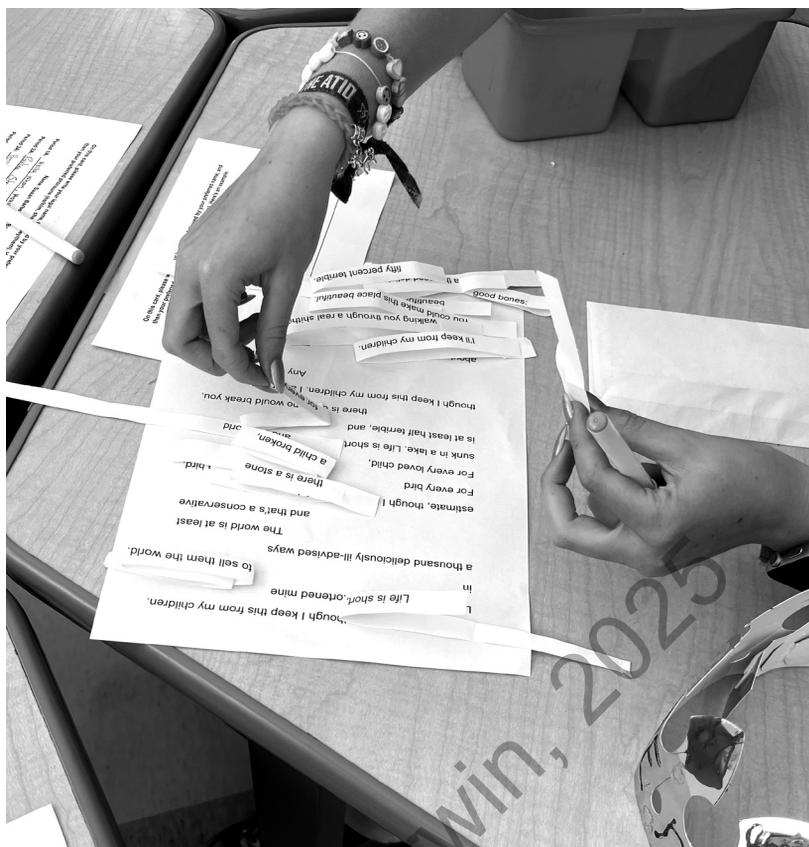
- ▶ What burdens you?
- ▶ Who are you?
- ▶ What do you own?
- ▶ What have you been given?
- ▶ What is calling you to the other side?

This lesson has evolved over time and become my standard first-day lesson typically using Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.b). I love using poem puzzles on the first day for several reasons: We dive into a text-based lesson on day one, and students are reading closely without me forcing it on them, working together to make meaning of a text, discussing, and having fun. This lesson never falls flat, and I've often wondered what makes this lesson so engaging. The puzzle element is a big piece of this: Students have a common goal of solving the puzzle and like racing against other groups. Students are also caught off guard on day one expecting to go over the syllabus and class rules but instead are engaging with content, which is a pleasant surprise.



Scan the QR code to read Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones."

qrs.ly/3qgayay



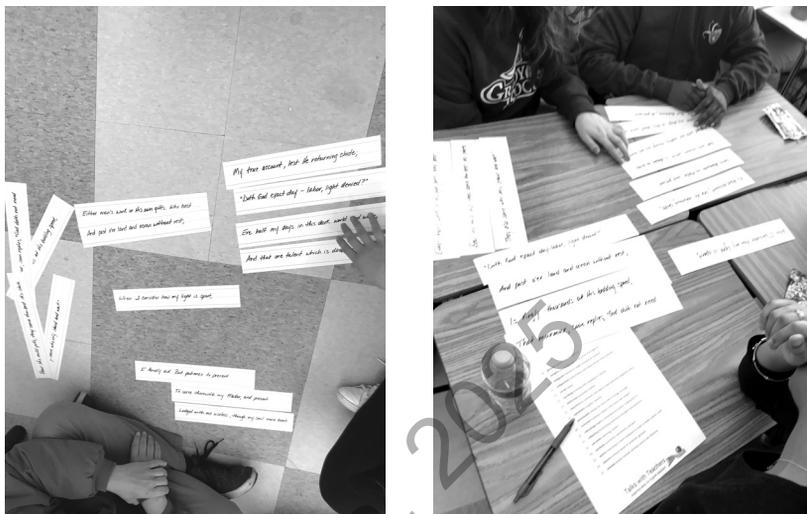
I decided to build in some annotation since students were invested in the poem. We used a tricolor annotation system where one student makes notes in one color, passes the poem to another student who either responds to their peer's notes or makes new notes based on further understanding in a second color, and the poem is passed one more time with the final student making notes in a third color. This strategy reinforces the concept that different readers enter a poem at different places and come away with different ideas. This is perfectly acceptable as there is not one right answer. Students are also able to see the way other students annotate and realize there is not one right way to mark a text.

Variations

To adapt the lesson to suit the unit you're teaching and the needs of your students, consider the following variations.

- Consider using sonnet strips as a way to reinforce structure in a sonnet unit. After teaching the structure of sonnets, have students construct the sonnets divided into 14 strips with one line per strip. I typically write an Italian sonnet on one side

in one color and an Elizabethan sonnet on the other side in a different color. Students must use their knowledge of sonnet construction and close reading skills to put the poems together. This reinforces the importance of sonnet structure and how the understanding of it can aid in unpacking the meaning.



- Poems that are written in couplets can easily be divided into two groupings of lines—the first line of the couplet and the second line of the couplet. Students work to put the couplet lines together and in order.
- Class discussion can be built around how the order of stanzas adds to the overall meaning of the poem.
- Have students record themselves reading the poem in a way that reflects their interpretation. Students may share their recordings in small groups.

The Lesson Plan

Time

90-minute block, but can be divided into two separate days of 45 minutes

Materials

Slide deck with words/phrases from poem, set of cut-out words/phrases from poem, copy of poem with words/phrases removed, colored pens

This lesson uses “Good Bones” by Maggie Smith as a specific example, but any poem can be substituted. Sample materials, including words/phrases to cut out and a copy of the poem “Good Bones” with words/phrases removed, are available on the book’s companion website.



Scan the QR code to access the sample materials for this lesson.

qrs.ly/aagayb1

Opening Activity

- ▶ Project a slide with the words/phrases from the poem you will be using. The words/phrases in Figure 1.1 are from “Good Bones.”
- ▶ Students choose a word or phrase from the slide and say it as we go around the room.
- ▶ Go around the room again choosing a different word/phrase to say.
- ▶ Finally, using either the first or second phrase, students say their word/phrase in a tone or expression that best reflects its connotation.

Figure 1.1 Slide With the Words/Phrases From “Good Bones”

for every kind	there is a stone
stranger	fifty percent terrible
and the world	walking you through a real shithole
I’ll keep from my children	good bones
a child broken	to sell them the world
Life is short	beautiful
You could make this place beautiful	a thousand delicious

Main Activity

- ▶ Provide students with the cut-out words/phrases from “Good Bones” students have been playing with already. Have students working in groups place the words/phrases in the poem where they think they belong.

- ▶ Once most students have completed the puzzle, pass out copies of “Good Bones” by Maggie Smith.
- ▶ Read the poem chorally as a class.
- ▶ Have students annotate the poem. I typically set a timer for 5 minutes to read and mark.
- ▶ Have students pass their annotated poem to a peer, then read and mark in another color building on the set of prior annotations. We typically pass twice so students can build upon each other’s thoughts, but adjust to the needs of your class.
- ▶ Discuss in small groups, then as a whole class.

Closure

- ▶ Show the “Good Bones” motion poem and ask students if this interpretation aligns with their interpretation. Encourage students who disagree to share how they view the poem differently, going back to the poem for support.



Scan the QR code to view the “Good Bones” motion poem by Anais La Rocca (2018).

qrs.ly/58gayb5

How to Get 100% Engagement

Approaching a poem can be intimidating and often cause students to check out. This lesson has a “puzzle” at the center that encourages students to do the opposite. Students participate to solve the puzzle, easily inviting them into the poem and enticing them into a close read. In doing so, students are making meaning from text, while working collaboratively and engaging with a subject that’s typically difficult for both students and teachers.