

Encourage them to change words, delete lines, add more poetic language, speak lines and words chorally, layer sound, include sound effects, pause for effect, and repeat images. Have them add lines that give more information in artistic ways.

Here is a good poem that two first-year teachers composed together quickly in one of my workshops. It reflects their combined experiences.

We are from ...
 ... schools and churches, parks and games;
 We are from ...
 ... Sunday night barbeques and Bubba's at Yankee Stadium.
 We are from ...
 ... "Sonny, What are you doing?" And "Tell Someone who cares."
 We are from ...
 ... Lazy Lake Nippissing and the Mattawa River
 ... Old photo albums rarely enjoyed
 ... My son's first snow boots, right up there on the shelf.
 ... My Mom's careful worrying and my dad's beginning belief in who I am.

Plead to Read: Have the students read their poems to another set of partners. The partners can give critical feedback. They might suggest words that can be changed or repeated, or different turns of phrase. If they wish to, let students read their poems in front of the class.

Stage the Page: My most successful work with this exercise happened when I encouraged some Grade 11 students to bring in a prop or a costume piece to augment their joint reading. I then asked them to think of a way to "stage the page." Where could this reading take place? How could they physically represent the meaning of the poem? Some students asked others in the class to help in the staging of the poem. One group staged their reading in a refugee camp, another at a large family reunion, and another at an airport departure lounge. Some students decided to play music to introduce their piece. Others brought in instruments and asked their friends to play a note at a significant time in the performance. Some students began their reading with recorded music that continued softly throughout the performance.

After we had shared the duos, I asked student pairs to pick their favorite lines, to write them on a sheet of paper, and to put them in a hat. The class was divided into three groups, and each group worked with the lines to come up with a "We are from ..." poem that they could edit to make something that worked artistically and theatrically. Each group had to find a way to stage the page: they could use music, song, props, costumes, and so on. They were allowed to "borrow lines" from other groups to make their poems work. Their culminating task was to do a choral reading of their poem in a school assembly. Their teacher, Bleema Getz, worked with them to create the class poem.

Here is one result.

We are from a world constantly changing
 A hard world, a big world, a get-up-and-get-go world.
 Where once we saw rivers moving with flawless flow
 And coconuts cracking in the hot summer sun
 We now see a dark cityscape of crime and drugs
 We are from families who work hard to protect us
 Descendants of general commanders and business women
 Who forbid us to fail.

Our lives echo with sayings
 "Don't do what I did." "You have the chance I never had."
 Carved over all of our features
 Are street lights in winter
 Presents under a tree
 Soccer at lunch
 And a songbird that spreads the magic of her voice on our hearts.

One of these students created an especially powerful "I Am From ..." poem on his own. Note how he does not begin the first and last stanzas with that phrase, but plays with I, A, M, F, R, O, M, in the first and last stanzas.

I Am From

In times of violence, poverty and crime
 As days go by we get closer to the end of time
 My heart is beating loud and fast
 Fire burns inside me when I remember the past
 Reality gets false and fiction gets more real
 Only those who analyze
 Maybe, they will realize the true deal.

I am from playing soccer at lunch or after school with most of my friends
 I am from all types of music but mostly rock and metal; they make me feel good when I'm stressed;
 I am from fried chicken, most kinds of fruits, mild and all Colombian food.

I am from Ossington to Dufferin station every morning and Dufferin mall at lunch or after school;

I am from a family that will always welcome me and will always be happy to see me

I am from studying history and looking at maps of the world, I think of how one day it will change;

I am from talking about wrestling, soccer, music, the world, martial arts, history and other stuff with some of my friends;

I am from a place that most people don't really know about, a country full of shadow caused by violence and drugs, the land of the best coffee in the world, my favourite place on earth, the country where I was born. I am from Colombia.

I feel irrational, so confrontational
 And I think my thoughts and I don't even want to
 My soul is in a comma and nobody can tell
 Foreseeing the future I try to get
 Ready to get faster, smarter and stronger
 Only if I want to survive any longer
 My body feels sick and tired of being sick and tired.

—Bernardo