

The Train Station Poem / Laura Stott

I have lived in many railroad towns, so I've come to name this classroom exercise the "Train Station" poem. Though feel free to change the setting from train station to desert, to bakery, to anything you want.

Goals:

- 1) A focus on imagery and unexpected detail.
- 2) An exercise in line breaks and revision.

Process:

Step 1) Have students, without using line breaks, write a paragraph description of either a train station or somewhere on some train tracks. I tell them to remember to focus on imagery and details that are unexpected (to stray away from train station cliché). I also tell them not to worry about line breaks right now, we're just going for imagery.

For an extra spin on their description I usually give them a mood to focus on, but I'll give it to them in a color. I'll write "blue", "red", or "orange" on the board and whatever emotions are evoked by the color is the mood they should go for in their description. So if blue is a peaceful place for them, then they should write descriptions of said train station that evoke a peaceful place. I find this helps lend some continuity (important later) and helps them see how imagery is used to evoke emotion.

Step 2) Give the students a minute to add in line breaks. (Sometimes we get to step two after I've given a lesson on the line. Galway Kinnell's poem "Wait" is a great sample poem to discuss line breaks.) Note: They don't have to re-write what they just composed, but merely add in a "/" where they feel it would be a good place to break the line if they were to turn this paragraph into a poem.

Step 3) Have each student choose one line from their page to write on the board in front of the classroom. If your classroom has a computer that projects onto a screen, sometimes it's easier to have them type it into a document instead.

Step 4) Now there is an assortment of lines, full of detail, at random in front of the class. Their task is to individually, or in groups, arrange the lines however they wish to come up with a unique poem. They must use each line, no omitting or changing of language allowed. However, they can put them in any order they wish and they are allowed to change and rearrange the line breaks.

Step 5) Finally, I like to make the various versions of the train station exercise available for the entire class to review. Often the lines work as a poem, even without them changing anything, which is a fun discussion to have as well. There is a lot of poetry happening in randomness. But it's exciting for them to see how many different kinds of poems emerge from the same lines, based on the order of the imagery and the line breaks that are used. It's a great lesson on revision and being willing to rework your lines. And they get to see how much the line breaks make a difference in how they read the poem. I also find that the color step above, evoking a mood, also helps add some continuity.