

Free-form falling

By Zac Chase

Introduction: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

While poetry is a unit covered in many high school English classrooms, the poetry generally introduced is highly formalized and structured. It adheres to set guidelines and is considered “classic” and “great” because it has stood the test of time. While I do not negate the argument for inclusion of this material, I would argue it should not be the only poetry to which students are exposed.

Formal poetry is important, but it is possible, in the emotionally charged adolescent years, many high school students will find the structurally restrictive rules of traditional poetry to be just that, restrictive.

It is with the goal of reaching beyond the structured and encouraging experimentation within a least restrictive medium, that I propose a unit on free-form expressive poetry.

By throwing out all instruments of scanning and any mention of iambs or tetrarchs, the students will be able to examine their initial aesthetic response to what they read.

Following this process, students will compare the works they created throughout this unit with those they have created when working within the structural expectations of more formalized poetry. They will be encouraged to ask which, or which parts, work best for them. Discussion will take place on the freedom of free verse and the guidance of formalism.

Purpose/NCTE-IRA Standards:

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their

interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Audience and Forum: This unit would be taught to a sophomore level high school English or literary genres class. The unit would be taught directly following a unit exploring and interpreting traditional poetry and its forms and conventions. Only with such a foundation in place, will this unit be able to effectively pick those same rules apart. It is a “you have to learn the rules before breaking them” approach.

Topic: To introduce and encourage experimentation in the medium of free-form expressive poetry. To illustrate to students that, while formal poetry is a valid and respected arm of literature, other methods of poetic expression are also valid and can lead to other realms of discovery.

To encourage an exploration of the function of sound and shape, rather than meaning in written texts.

Definition: Free-form expressive poetry is poetry that goes beyond blank verse or even slam poetry. The idea here is not to impose rules. The poem can have punctuation, or it cannot. It may recognize traditional spelling or it may not. The form of the poem is completely in the hands of the poet. He or she holds the sole discretion over how the function of the poem is carried out. The idea is to convey

or elicit an emotional theme or response using the aesthetics of the poem, the phonology.

A slight similarity can be drawn between this form of creative expression and the language known to computer hackers as Elite. Defying traditional spelling and syntactical rules, Elite is a lexiconographical and grammatical system adapted from traditional alphanumeric characters to serve as a language for computer hackers.

In a similar manner, free-form poetry utilizes existing words – specifically their sounds – to create a written work dependent heavily on its sound to convey its meaning.

These principles and definitions will all be introduced to the students in the first segment of the unit.

Calendar:

Part A

Students will examine a traditional poem of their choice and then attempt to create their own poem in what they understand and believe to be the style of that poem. For example, if a student picks a Shakespearean sonnet, then that student will compose a poem according to the rhyme scheme and form rules governing a Shakespearean sonnet.

Students will discuss in small groups their reactions to the requirement of composing a work that was to adhere to a given set of rules. The class will come back together and discuss the project as a large group, touching on the positive and negative aspects of writing according to a given form. They will then revisit their works and rewrite them ignoring the rules that were set before them completely and focusing only on theme.

Students will return to their small groups and discuss the changes they have made and how they decided to make them.

Part B

The class will discuss in large group the effect they have noticed form and traditional poetic rules having on their aesthetic response to poetry. They will answer questions such as: Why do I have a certain response to a poem? What if, any effect do elements like rhyme scheme have on my emotional response? How important is sound in eliciting my aesthetic response to poetry?

They will then return to the traditional poems with which they started and begin replacing the words of the poem with words that sound similar. All the while, the students will be asked to consider how the replacements affect not the meaning, but the feeling of the poem. Back in small groups, the students will exchange poems and record their aesthetic response to the original and revised versions.

Students will engage in word association exercises where they begin with an emotion and then free associate not only words that can be used to describe that emotion, but any words that come to mind be it because of their sound or meaning. From there, students will move to writing to describe using the sounds words provide. For example, if a student is attempting to describe a dark and stormy night, he or she will not talk about the feel of the air or the crescent moon. Instead he or she might write something like, “glue-headed ink stain, rife with complaints of decaying reason.” The words will have no obvious connection with the scene, but will inspire a feeling in the audience similar to that they might have had if the scene had been described in detail.

The students will be given one entire class period to write freely and without restrictions in a manner that is in line with that they practiced in the earlier part of the week,

Part C

The works, presented anonymously by the instructor or by the writer according to his or her discretion will be read aloud to the entire class. The students will engage in a reflective examination of the exercises and discuss the similarities and differences between the works they created and the works they examined in previous units. Have they created valid forms of poetry? With what

criticisms might their works be met? Which did they find most challenging? Why? The students will discuss their thoughts on the importance of sound and aesthetic response on the writing process. To what extent must a writer be aware of the sound of the work he or she composes?

Example:

The lovers get their due in the meantime of enraptured luxure seeking melody or rhapsody or rapture in the arms of self-separated wholly in the wings of wandering existence playing roles unavioded sometimes reality paces genuinely concerned yet undone by the worry of passing shifting flour for the batter striking home sold for the sake of the soul's mortgage more interested than cowboy fashioned milkshakes sweating on the edge of calamity treasuring dangers sipped tea in plain sight of vengeful time shielded by flagrant violations welcomed handsomely by the candlestick wound lengthwise with the care of two of one not homesick for the sake of the acid reflux of heartbreak after scathing reviews entreated patronage of patronization on behalf of God or heart or a firm nuggety center fielded enticingly by the pentathelete of daydreams remembered only in the absence of awkward separation for the sake of the breath of truth uncalled with consent from kiss after embrace after bearing of all for sake of freedom from self in search of all inside the better part of anything.

Works Referenced

- Carroll, Lewis. "Jabberwocky." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy. New York: Norton & Company, 1996. 1032-34.
- Giovanni, Nikki. "Luxury." *The Women and the Men*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975.
- National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association. *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Urbana and Newark: National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996.
- Raine, Craig. "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy. New York: Norton & Company, 1996. 1824-25.

First Hour Sophomore Lit.
Zac Chase

Free-form
Day 1: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This lesson will serve as an introductory day and will follow the completion of a unit on traditional poetry. It will be a Monday class.

Objective: The students will experience writing a poem while adhering to given structural requirements. Students will utilize previous knowledge and adapt it to this new unit.

Preparation: Students will need to select a structure-oriented poem of at least 20 lines and bring it with them to class.

Activities:

1. Students will be given the opportunity to share their weekends. (5 min.)
2. Students will examine the poems they brought with them and be asked to scan their poems for rhyme scheme and rhythm. (15 min.)
3. Once they have determined these aspects of their poems, students will be asked to develop their own poems according to the same rhyme schemes and rhythms of the poems they selected. The new poems are to be relating to wholly other themes than the poems they selected. (25 min.)
4. **Closure:** Those students not done with their work will be asked to complete it as homework. All students will be told to bring both the poems they selected and the poems they created into class the next day.

Evaluation: Students will receive homework credit for bringing a poem meeting the given requirements with them to class.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils, a poem of each student's choosing.

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Free-form
Day 2: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This is day 2 of the unit, a Tuesday.

Objective: The students will evaluate the poems they completed as homework and identify the difficulties and eases inherent in the process of adhering to the form.

Preparation: Students will need to have completed the homework from the previous day as well as bring the original scanned poem to class.

Activities:

1. The teacher will hand out and read Nikki Giovanni's "Luxury." (5 min.)
2. The students will discuss how Giovanni challenges formal expectations in "Luxury." (10 min.)
3. The students will be asked to volunteer to share both their selected poems as well as those they created with the rest of the class. (15 min.)
4. The students will break into groups and draft difficulties and eases they discovered when creating a poem according to another's structural expectation. (15 min.)
5. **Closure:** Each group will be asked to turn in the difficulties and eases they drafted as well as share one difficulty with the class. The students will turn in their scanned poems and be asked to bring their original poems to class the next day. (5 min.)

Evaluation: Students will earn credit for correctly scanning their poems as well as completing the group exercise.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils, a scanned poem of each student's choosing, a poem created by each student, copies of Nikki Giovanni's "Luxury."

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Free-form
Day 3: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This is the third day of the unit, a Wednesday. It is a day of student-led evaluation and creation.

Objective: The students will evaluate, as a class the difficulties and eases involved in adhering to poetic structure. They will experiment with leaving the structure behind, yet maintaining theme.

Preparation: Students will need to bring their self-created poem to class. The teacher will need to compile the various groups' lists of difficulties and eases for class distribution.

Activities:

1. Students will be asked to free write while listening to Saint Saenz' "Danse Macabre." The teacher will pass out graded work. (7 min.)
2. Students will be given the opportunity to share what they have written. (3 min.)
3. Once each student has received a compiled list of drafted difficulties and eases, the class will discuss what they thought of the form assignment and whether or not they enjoyed it. What did they learn? (20 min.)
4. Students will compose a new version of their original work. This time, they will maintain the theme of the work, but ignore all structural rules. (15 min.)
5. **Closure:** Those students not done with their work will be asked to complete it as homework. All students will be told to bring all three of the poems they have worked with to class the next day.

Evaluation: Students will earn credit by completing the free write as well as participating in the class discussion.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils, difficult and ease handout, Saint Saenz' "Danse Macabre."

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Free-form
Day 4: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This is the fourth lesson in the unit, a Thursday.

Objective: Students will evaluate their ability to maintain theme in a poem while disregarding structure.

Preparation: Students will bring all three of the poems they have been working on with them to class.

Activities:

1. The students will color/draw a visualization of a scene from one of the poems of their choosing. (15 min.)
2. The teacher will ask the students to share which of the three poems they decided to illustrate and why. (10 min.)
3. The students will share the unstructured works from the last lesson and discuss, as a class, how they created the new poems. (15 min.)
4. The teacher will introduce the homework question of how the three poems are connected. Is the original piece at all visible in the third? Why or why not? (5 min.)
5. **Closure:** The teacher will direct the students to compose an essay on the connections between the three poems. What are they and how are they evident? (5 min.)

Evaluation: Students will receive participation credit for creating an illustration and contributing to in-class discussion.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils, a poem of each student's choosing, art supplies.

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Free-form
Day 5: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This lesson will be the fifth day of the unit and wrap up the first half of the unit, a Friday.

Objective: The students will participate in the peer revision process. The students will discuss current events.

Preparation: Students will need to bring each piece of work they have created thus far with them to class.

Activities:

1. Students will write five subjects they consider to be “current events” and pass them in. (10 min.)
2. Students will pair up. (5 min.)
3. Students will be directed to peer review each work they have created, ending with the assigned homework essay. The peer review must include suggestions for revision. (20 min.)
4. The teacher will quiz the students on current events trivia taken from the topics they presented and other topics deemed relevant. The first student to answer each question will receive a doughnut. (15 min.)
5. **Closure:** The students will be instructed to consider the suggestions for revision and be prepared to hand in revised drafts by the next class.

Evaluation: Students will earn participation points for turning in current events lists and participating in peer review.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils.

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Free-form
Day 6: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This lesson is the sixth day of the unit, a Monday.

Objective: The students will evaluate what they have learned thus far. The students will explore the effect of sound and shape of words on their aesthetic response.

Preparation: Students will bring everything they have completed thus far in the unit with them to class.

Activities:

1. Students will be given the opportunity to share their weekends. (5 min.)
2. Students will journal on what they have learned thus far as well as what they would like to learn. What they consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of the unit. (15 min.)
3. Students will turn in their revised drafts with their original drafts and their journal entries. (5 min.)
4. Each student will be asked to share his or her favorite word. (10 min.)
5. Students will break into groups of 3-4 and discuss why their favorite words are their favorite words. (10 min.)
6. **Closure:** The students will be assigned the homework of taking the last poem they created and replacing its words with words that sound the same but have no contextual relevance, only similar sound. (5 min.)

Evaluation: Students will earn credit for turning in their assignment and following established grammatical and syntactical standards for the course.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils.

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Free-form
Day 7: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This lesson will be the seventh in the unit, a Tuesday. It will focus on aesthetic response to phonetics and morphology.

Objective: The students will examine two poet's works and how they use the sounds of language rather than the attached meaning. The students will consider the process of completing a work based entirely on its sound and appearance.

Preparation: The teacher must prepare copies of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and Craig Raine's "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home."

Activities:

1. Students will listen as the teacher reads Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." The students will have copies of the poem. (5 min.)
2. The class will engage in a discussion of whether "Jabberwocky" has meaning and how Carroll forms that meaning. (15 min.)
3. Students will listen as the teacher reads Craig Raine's "A Martian Writes a Postcard Home." They will have copies. (5 min.)
4. The class will engage in a discussion of how Raine creates meaning and establishes understanding within "Martian." (15 min.)
5. **Closure:** Students will be asked to share their thoughts on how they would approach writing for form and not at all for attached meaning. They will be asked to bring their favorite "writing music" to class the next day. (10 min.)

Evaluation: Students will earn credit for in-class participation.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils, "Jabberwocky" and "A Martian Writes a Postcard Home."

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Free-form
Day 8: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This is the eighth day of the unit, a Wednesday. It is a day of creation.

Objective: The students will free-write.

Preparation: Students will need to bring their favorite “writing music” to class.

Activities:

1. Students will be asked to lend the music of their choice to the teacher. (5 min.)
2. Students will free write whatever they like without regard to commonly held linguistic meaning while listening to the music they brought to class. (40 min.)
3. **Closure:** The students will be asked to journal, as homework, how they felt during the assignment. (5 min.)

Evaluation: Students will earn participation points by writing for the allotted time.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils, music.

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Free-form
Day 9: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: While this is the ninth and next to last day of the unit, a Thursday, it will serve as a closing day to the learning portion.

Objective: The students will reflect on the place of sound and form in creating and choosing words as well as how they interact with structural ramifications of poetry.

Preparation: Students should bring their homework reflections as well as the poems they created in class.

Activities:

1. The teacher will begin class by watching the portion of “Dead Poet’s Society” in which the student improvises a poem. (5 min.)
2. The students will be asked to reflect, in writing, on the various creative steps they have taken throughout the unit. (10 min.)
3. The class will discuss the unit and how they view the various aspects of language and poetry they have encountered. They will be encouraged to use their homework and in-class writing. (15 min.)
4. The teacher will hand back the assignments collected earlier in the unit. (5 min.)
5. The students will write for the remainder of class on the question of whether to adhere to formal standards or ignore them completely. (15 min.)
6. **Closure:** If students do not feel they have completed the assignment, they may take it home and turn it in the next day.

Evaluation: Students will earn credit for class participation.

Materials: Paper, writing utensils.

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Free-form
Day 10: 50 minutes

Rationale: Designed to follow an introductory unit to scansion and poetic structure, this unit is meant to challenge students to examine how they create, respond to and appreciate poetry. It introduces the question of what benefits them more as writers — adhering to formal standards or ignoring them entirely.

Orientation: This is the tenth and final day of the unit, a Friday. The student will be sharing.

Objective: The students will share the works they have discovered and created over the course of the unit.

Preparation: Students will need each of the poems they have worked with and created over the course of the unit.

Activities:

1. The teacher will read a work he or she has created. (5 min.)
2. Students will be asked to turn in whatever works they have outstanding. (5 min.)
3. Students will be given the chance to share whatever works they like while enjoying doughnuts, milk and juice. (40 min.)
4. **Closure:** Students will be praised for their hard work throughout the course of the unit.

Evaluation: Students will earn participation points by reading a work before the class.

Materials: Poems, doughnuts, milk, juice.