

## ABSTRACT

5th Grade Students explore the public and private dimensions of poetry through the medium of poetry banners

# Diving Into the Letters in Poems:

## Creating Poetry Banners

Looking at something from a distance, being drawn to look more closely at it walking up to it, looking at the details that individually tantalize the eye, is a fascinating process. A composition's full sweep can be tantalizing. Murals by Diego Rivera can tantalize in this way, as can Marc Chagall's *Four Seasons* mosaic (on the corner of Dearborn and Monroe Avenues in downtown Chicago), and Roy Lichtenstein's *Times Square Mural* (in New York City Transit's Times Square subway station).

From a distance, Juana Alicia's *A Woman's Place: A Warrior in the Struggle for International Solidarity*, the mural in UE Local 506 Hall in Erie, PA, catches your eye with the vividly colored butterfly in the middle, and two trains moving in opposite directions toward the edges of the mural. As you look more closely, you see two women foregrounded inside the butterfly and a sweeping hilly landscape in the background. There is a plethora of individuals and groups whose combined narratives seem to swirl and intertwine like some of the shapes and patterns that festoon the mural.

The microcosmic-to-macrocosmic range with which one can look at a mural is intriguing. Introducing poetry students to good poems, helping them to write meaningful poems, and having those poems become part of a poetry banner is one type of project that can explore the similar microcosmic-to-macrocosmic scope within a composition.

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Writing poetry can be such a private and intimate endeavor, yet part of the joy of writing poetry comes with reaching a larger audience that connects with your poem. You can reach a larger audience by physically addressing a large audience in an amphitheater, on the radio, or on TV, or by getting your poetry published. You can also reach a larger audience by magnifying the image of the letters in a public space. In a way, creating a poetry banner can be seen as a metaphor for the link between what is intimate and private, and what is public.

What is a poetry banner? Here are some possibilities:

- The banner contains a poem or part of a poem, depending on how big you want it to be. It could contain a line, phrase, or stanza. An entire haiku or epigram could be contained in a poetry banner. Here are some lines from poems that have been used in poetry banners I have helped students make over the past several years:

“You can win if you would try. / Keep cool, keep cool.” — from Marcus Garvey’s “Keep Cool”

“The Brain—is wider than the Sky— / For—put them side by side— / The one the other will contain / With ease—and You—beside—” — from Emily Dickinson’s “The Brain—is wider than the Sky—”

“I labour by singing light” — from Dylan Thomas’ “In My Craft or Sullen Art”

- The banner combines text and image in stunning ways. For instance, the shapes and colors of the banner’s background could complement the poem’s words and lines. Construction paper, collaged images from magazines, and/or students’ line drawings could be among the elements of the banner’s background. You could bring in some examples of fonts, which might inspire students’ imagination as they decide how the shapes of the letters should appear.

- The banner can assume a variety of shapes and sizes, and it can be affixed to different surfaces at different locations in a school. It can be long and thin, square, triangular, trapezoidal, or any other shape. It can be small enough to fit on a door, or it can be long enough to cover the front wall of a classroom (perhaps above the blackboard). It can fit above students’ lockers in the hallway.

- Each letter of the poem, or poem excerpt, that you would like to include in the poetry banner can contain a poem by each of the students in your class.

A poetry banner is an exciting way of exploring a poem’s visual dimensions. Helping students create poetry banners is a way of connecting the personal and the public, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, in a way that embraces and advocates meaningful creative expression by young people.

Many young people’s early encounters with poems happen when they come across poems as they are reading a Language Arts text for a class. Every day, young people are exposed to texts that fill one’s vision. Movies shown in movie theaters contain film titles, credits, actors’ names, and subtitles in huge letters intended to capture viewers’ attention. Billboard signs contain texts advertising casinos, TV shows, hospitals, and debt consolidation services; political and religious messages that pervade our “eye-scapes” in cities, in

small towns, and in the countryside along highways. A lot of the large-scale texts that young people are exposed to contain very little spiritual, educational, or cultural value.

Much of what floods our vision as we move through our daily lives is out of our control; we can choose to look at those things and process them, or we can avert our gaze and move away from places that bombard us with those images. Poetry banners offer a way for young people to assert their creativity simultaneously in private spheres and public space and to examine and explore individual and collective identities.

Poetry belongs in public spaces and serves as a counter to the “junk text” that surrounds us. A poetry banner is a nice addition to other banners and messages that students, teachers, school administrators, and parents see on classroom and hallway walls. Many of the messages I have seen in schools—“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference;” “Enter with an open mind;” “If you’re not sure, ask questions”—may be important, but they are manufactured. Student-created poetry banners empower students; the process gives them an opportunity to begin thinking about how they can play active roles in shaping the world around them.

Pablo Neruda is a remarkable poet, and many of his poems are appropriate for students of all ages. Neruda is famous for the many ways he has innovated with poetry, including his revolutionizing of the ode form. His odes to an artichoke, salt, wine, tomatoes, maize, and other objects are masterfully crafted, but I am particularly fond of his ode entitled “A Lemon.” A lemon is such a powerful fruit; think of all of the delicious dishes and drinks you can make that use lemons! Kids like lemons because when you put a lemon slice into your mouth it makes your face do funny things.

In the following project, we used Neruda’s “A Lemon” as a starting point. At the time, I was Poet in Residence at Burbank School through the Poetry Center of Chicago’s Hands on Stanzas program. My fifth grade students wrote oodles of juicy odes to fruit, and the poetry banners we created were veritable cornucopias that spilled over with those odes.

Fifth grade students in three classes at Burbank Elementary read Neruda’s “A Lemon” aloud. We began by focusing on the remarkable images contained in the poem: “sodden with fragrance;” “We open / the halves / of a miracle;” and “Cutting the lemon / the knife / leaves a little / cathedral.” I asked students to share experiences they have had with lemons. We agreed that there’s nothing quite like the taste of fresh

squeezed lemonade. We talked about some subjects to which words and phrases allude, such as biology (“the tree’s planetarium”), commerce (“The harbors are big with it— / bazaars / for the light and the / barbarous gold”), religion (“creation’s / original juices,” “cathedral,” and “altars”), and astronomy (“the starry / divisions”).

I told students that we would be making a poetry banner, and I explained what it is. I showed them pictures of poetry banners that former students of mine had made at Sabin Magnet School and Taft High School. We talked about how a poetry banner could make what is small. We talked about how some things in our immediate environment cannot be controlled. For instance, the Cloverhill Bakery is across the street from Burbank School and we cannot control the smells of donuts, crumb cakes, and honey buns that from the bakery. There’s a train track near the school and we cannot control the sound of the train whistles that regularly blare through the classrooms. We talked about

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Poetry banner.

different things you can see in your environment—billboard signs, festival banners—and how we can have some control about what our environment contains.

We brainstormed types of fruit that could be used as subjects for odes. Two students in each class wrote down different kinds of fruit on the board. We started talking about what people think about when they think of fruit. I asked, “What’s your favorite fruit?” A bunch of students said things like, “banana,” “strawberry,” “apple,” “cantaloupe,” and “blueberry,” but a few students contributed to the list of fruits by exclaiming that “lemon-lime,” “frankenberry,” and “tomato” are their favorite fruits.

After my student helpers had written down about 30 different kinds of fruit on the board, I asked each student to volunteer to write about a different one. I went down the list and assigned one student to each fruit. I found that when I am asking students to write poems that are inspired by a particular poem by someone else, I can be sure that I will get a broad range of different poems if I ask each student to pick a different topic that relates to the theme. Otherwise, I might have gotten ten poems about apples, five about bananas, etc.

I asked students to free-write about the fruit they had chosen. Here are some examples of excerpts from fifth grade students’ free-writing:

- “An apple is circular.”—Hunter F.
- “I like orange juice, and the orange juice is sweet. Some people drink orange juice or make turkey with orange juice.”—Daniel S.
- “If you dip a nectarine slice in sugar it will taste too sweet.”—Antiara T.
- “Oranges are sweet, juicy, and delicious. They’re sort of roundish, and plump. They’re as orange as oil paint.”—Givanni V.
- “A strawberry is delicious, juicy, and tasty. It tastes like strawberry ice cream, milkshakes, and cake. It has my favorite color, red, had a green leaf on top, and has little black dot seeds.”—Yaritz V.
- “When my *estomago* hurts I always eat a lemon slice with salt.”—Mauricio R.
- “When I was a little baby my mom used to give me Gerber apple sauce baby food. I will always love apples.”—Tania, fifth grade

Then the students wrote their odes to different kinds of fruit. Here are some odes by fifth grade students at Burbank Elementary School:

## Ode to a Blueberry

by Luis Brito

A blueberry is a blue fruit.  
I like blueberries because they are very blue  
and they are cool. They taste very good to  
eat.  
When you eat one you feel like eating more  
and more because they are so good.  
A blueberry looks like a grape fruit.

## Ode to a Lime or Lemon

by Jonathan Bustos

A green apple  
is like a green  
lime. A green  
lime tastes sour  
like a lemon.  
A lime grows  
on a tree,  
which is a  
green plant.  
A lemon  
is yellow like  
the sun.

## Ode to a Strawberry

by Cynthia Cruz

A little red strawberry  
Sweet but sour  
Very good to eat  
Barely any smell  
Surrounded by little seeds  
Has a green leaf hat  
No seeds inside  
Roundish but ovalish  
Strawberries!

## Ode to Apples

by Jonathan Espinoza

Apples are red and green. We use apples  
to eat. Some people use apples to play.  
There are yellow ones too.  
An apple is juicy and tastes good.  
For me red apples taste better  
Than green ones.  
My family loves apples too. My cousin  
has an apple tree. I always go  
to my cousin's house to grab apples.

## Ode to Peaches

by Yoselin Garcia

Peaches are round  
They are red and brown  
Open them and you will  
See their pit.  
They taste delicioso  
You can eat them anytime  
You want. The peach  
Is as big as the world.

## Ode to a Mango

by Johann Sanchez

Mangos, with you I get happy  
but when I have to go somewhere  
I would be unhappy without a mango.  
Your taste is so delicious. My brain  
goes, "Orange, orange, and orange."  
When I take a bite of you I think of  
Mexico.  
Stores have all kinds of mangos and fruit  
but I always choose you  
because you are the tastiest  
thing I have ever tasted.  
I'm the luckiest kid in the world  
to have you, mangoes.

## Ode to Watermelons

by Mayra Hubierto

Ode to watermelons are good. They are tasty and juicy.  
 A watermelon is red and green. I sometimes have it on Christmas Eve. I eat it on my birthday, especially in the summer. Summer is the best time to eat watermelon. Watermelon is my favorite kind of fruit.  
 I eat it for breakfast. My family loves watermelon too but not as much as me. I eat watermelon with my friends. My friends enjoy eating watermelon with me when it is my birthday.  
 Watermelon green is like grass green and watermelon red is like a heart that is red. I love the colors red and green.  
 Red is my favorite color. Green is my second favorite color.  
 Watermelon is like if you're eating grass with a heart of love.  
 I think watermelon is like a heart and grass.

## Ode to Lemons and Limes

by Antonio Pickett

Lemons are yellow and very sour  
 And some of them are sour with power.  
 They look sweet but they're not.  
 Some people even think they're hot.  
 Lemons are yellow.  
 Limes are green.  
 They are the sourest things.  
 And when you taste a lemon  
 it feels like a ring.  
 But lemons and limes  
 are shapiest things.

## Dear Mango,

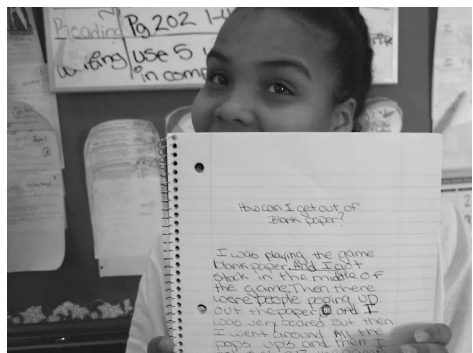
by Darian Segura

When I cut a mango there is a big fat pit inside.  
 The color of the pit is white. Every time I am done  
 Eating a mango I wash it and I put the pit Inside dirt. Then a mango tree starts growing.  
 I eat them and take out the pits from those mangos.  
 Then I plant those pits too. A mango is my favorite fruit.

## Ode to Pineapples

by Romeo Torres

Ode to pineapples, so juicy and sweet.  
 You could slice or dice it into cubes.  
 Yellower than the sun, slice rings, cubes, or just drink the juice. Its taste is unbelievable, sweeter than sugar, juicier than juice. It's as good as the sun  
 Setting on a summer day with you  
 and your true love strolling along a beach.  
 Ode to pineapples. I like them. Do you?



Poet.

At the end of class a few students read aloud what they had written. During my following session at Burbank, we worked on creating the poetry banner that would contain and celebrate these students' poems. Each student was assigned a letter in a phrase from the poem. Then each student was assigned a letter within a few lines from Neruda's "A Lemon." Here are the lines that Ms. Arce's students focused on—"We open / the halves / of a miracle," and Mr. LaCerbera's and Mr. Stasiak's students focused on "creation's / original juices, / irreducible." Each student cut a letter out of a piece of construction paper, copied his or her ode onto that letter, and then glued those letters onto a banner-sized background. They then decorated these with markers and small, colorful pieces of paper. One banner is hanging in one classroom, and the other one is hanging in the hallway outside another classroom. Students were very excited to see the poetry banners go up, and over the next several months other teachers in that hallway approached me to say they liked seeing the banners up on the walls. Later that school year, my students created hand-stitched poetry books, made recordings of themselves reading their own poetry, and worked on other poetry projects. However, creating the poetry banners was a special project because it was such a fun way to explore how individual and collective efforts can mesh, how small and personal phenomena relate to large and public ones, and how images and text can interplay. Students explored these different dimensions of creating art while playing around with language and while expressing and elevating the juicy, everyday experience of eating fruit.

## A Lemon

by Pablo Neruda

Out of lemon flowers  
loosed  
on the midnight, love's  
lashed and insatiable  
essences,  
sodden with fragrance,  
the lemon tree's yellow  
emerges,  
the lemons  
move down  
from the tree's planetarium.

Delicate merchandise!  
The harbors are big with it—  
bazaars  
for the light and the  
barbarous gold.  
We open  
the halves  
of a miracle,  
and a clotting of acids  
brims

into the starry  
divisions:  
creation's  
original juices,  
irreducible, changeless,  
alive:  
so the freshness lives on  
in a lemon,  
in the sweet-smelling house of the rind,  
the proportions, arcane and acerb.

Cutting the lemon  
the knife  
leaves a little  
cathedral:  
alcoves unguessed by the eye  
that open acidulous glass  
to the light; topazes  
riding the droplets,  
altars,  
aromatic facades . . .

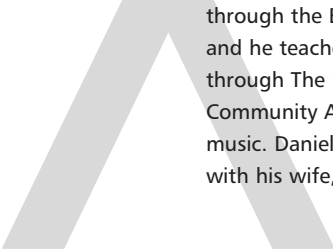
from Pablo Neruda's *Five Decades (Poems: 1925-1970)*, translated by Ben Belitt. New York: Grove Press, 1974.

## Note

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