

Open-form poems: Story poems

Goal: Students learn to write a compact, polished “word movie,” then learn to add line breaks and adjust for rhythm and impact. They also learn to have fun turning ordinary sentences into open-form poems.

- Start this unit by introducing the idea of “word movies.” If students have already done some work in that unit, they’ve already got it.
- Remind students of rhyming poems they already know: Song lyrics, nursery rhymes, etc. Then introduce students to the idea of open-form poems (story poems).
- Make sure students know that some poems rhyme. Others don't. Open-form poems do not have to rhyme or have complete sentence structure.
 - *Note to the teacher. Why open-form poems? The open-form poem form is widely accepted among poets. It allows students to create a short scene and take it a step further, adding line breaks and revising the words for rhythm. It helps students get ready for longer pieces. The need to rhymes can often make that goal harder for students and also make it hard for them to put a scene into their own words.*

Maggie Anderson, as director of Kent State’s Poetry Center, often encourages young Appalachian poets to write open-form poems. As the introduction said, she feels “that this most accurately allows her to express the rhythms of speech and subject matter of her Appalachian heritage”. ([Click here to read the entire piece.](#))

Prep for this unit: For these activities, make a handout, choosing from the open-form story poems at the end of this file. Put the no-breaks version on the top of the page, written out as one solid paragraph. Below it, put the poem as the writer wrote it, with line breaks.

This could be a three-day activity, one of those activities that establishes a tool you can use the rest of the year.

- **Activity 1: Write your own open-form poem, step one: This could be a three-day unit, broken into manageable pieces.**
 - **First day: Get started.** Introduce students to open-form poems, using any of the poems in this file.
 - Look at a poem as a group. Write it on the board. Read it out loud, pausing slightly at the end of each line, at the break, as the poet wrote it. Introduce the idea of line breaks. Choose a line: Why do you think the poet decided to put the line break there?

- Ask students to look at the no-breaks version on their handout. Ask them where they would put the line breaks if they were the poet. They can use a slanted line to show where they would put the break. Ask them to compare their version to the breaks the poet chose. Which do you like better? Why?
- For homework, you'll be asking students to write three sentences that tell something that happened, using words that create a word-movie in the reader's mind.
 - Do an example as a group first. Write three sentences on the board that tell or start a story. *Example: My little black dog, Sparky, was digging a hole under a tree. He had his head poked down in the hole when suddenly, a big white dog burst through the neighbor's bushes. He and Sparky growled, touched noses, then started digging together.*
 - Ask students to decide where they might put line breaks in that example, to make the three sentences into an open-form poem. Show the breaks on the board, with slanting lines.
- Homework: Write a three-sentence story. Decide where you might put line breaks. Put them in in pencil, so you can erase them if you change your mind.
- **Second day: Make it rhythmic:**
- First, do a word-rhythm exercise with the students, reading a poem and beating out a rhythm. You may want to try it with nursery rhymes or familiar song lyrics. See the rhythm exercises in middle activities.
- Ask students to write out their three sentences as an open-form poem with line breaks.
- Share, in whatever form works for your group.
- Ask students to go through the three sentences they wrote for homework, reading them out loud. Get a few volunteers to read.
- Ask them to look at them carefully, syllable by syllable, deciding where the rhythm is bumpy. Can they take out an unnecessary word or change a word, to make the rhythm work better?
- **Third day: Add a personal thought to your poem.** Show the students how Cynthia Rylant added her thought in the

last line of “Little Short Legs.” (Scroll down to see the poem.) Ask students to add a third sentence to their poem that lets readers know what they think about what happened in the first two sentences. Put in line breaks. Do you like it better with or without your thought?

- **Homework:** Do it again! Write three sentences that create a little mind-movie of something that happened, then one sentence for what you think about what happened in the first two sentences. Put in line breaks and work on the rhythm.

○ **Activity 2: Revision/ Taking out unnecessary words.**

- Give students an example first. Give them two sentences, with at least one obviously clunky word in both. Ask them to read the sentences out loud. Rule of thumb: “If it doesn’t come out of your mouth easily, think about changing it.” Which words could go? (Students often like the image of “scrubbing” their lines.)
- Are there words you’d like to take out or change? If it’s hard to say the line out loud, can you take out a word or find another way to say the same thing in good rhythm?
- Ask students to look at their story poem and write out a second version that breaks the lines differently. > Ask them to read both versions of their poems out loud, (everyone reads at once) pausing slightly at the end of each line. Which version feels better to you?

Activity 3: Apply what you learned to other writing.

- Find a paragraph in a newspaper story that offers good line break possibilities. Put it on a handout sheet and ask the students to draw lines where they would make the line breaks. Ask them to copy it out as a poem, with their own line breaks.
 - Give them three lines from a book or reading they know. Ask them to convert it to a story-poem.
 - Find creative prose for they to play with: advertisements, for instance. Give them some two-line ads to choose from. They add the third line, their comment.

“Little Short Legs,” by Cynthia Rylant

From *Waiting to Waltz*, no recording.

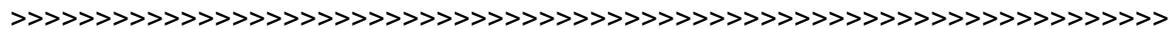
(This is a fine book for open-form poems for this age.)

No-breaks version:

Little black dog down the road, we called Little Short Legs. One day, my mother, late for work, went driving hard down that dirt road. Ran over Little Short Legs. Never knew a grown-up could make such a mistake. Never knew one could make it and say it was so and feel sorry. But she did. And nothing for me to say but, “It’s all right, Mom. It’s all right.”

With breaks, as Cynthia placed them.

Little black dog
down the road
we called
Little Short Legs.
One day
my mother late for work
went driving hard
down that dirt road.
Ran over Little Short Legs.
Never knew a grown-up could
make such a mistake.
Never knew one could make it
and say it was so
and feel sorry.
But she did.
And nothing for me to say
but
it’s all right, Mom.
It’s all right.



“There,” by Maggie Anderson (Track 8)

No-breaks version:

Hot summer days he'd get off the bus from the city with his tie loosened and his jacket over his shoulder, and his daughter would run to meet him. Did you bring me something, Daddy? Did you bring me something? And in the apartment, before his wife died, she'd be there cooking dinner. Every summer, she grew tomatoes in boxes outside their tenth-floor kitchen window. She even made and canned juice for the winter. Once she tried peppers. They'd have a drink in the living room with the fan going, while the daughter played with the monkey on wooden sticks that did ring tricks as she moved the sticks in and out, in and out. Sometimes he would talk about the humidity or the ride on the subway. Or what happened at the office. And most every evening his wife, before she died, would speak of her window box vegetables, how well they did, despite the awkward staking under the fire escape, and the farm they had left to come live there.

With breaks, as Maggie placed them:

Hot summer days he'd get off the bus
from the city with his tie loosened
and his jacket over his shoulder
and his daughter would run to meet him.

Did you bring me something, Daddy?
Did you bring me something?

And in the apartment, before his wife died,
she'd be there cooking dinner.
Every summer she grew tomatoes
in boxes outside their tenth floor
kitchen window. She even made and canned
juice for the winter. Once she tried peppers.

They'd have a drink in the living room
with the fan going, while the daughter
played with the monkey on wooden sticks
that did ring tricks as she moved the sticks
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Sometimes he would talk about the humidity
or the ride on the subway. Or what happened
at the office. And most every evening his wife,
before she died, would speak of her window box
vegetables, how well they did, despite the
awkward staking under the fire escape
and the farm they had left to come live there.

