

## It Is Poetry Because.... Discovering The Poem As You Write (For Middle and High School Students)

Poets are aware that the poems they make assume their own lives during the act of writing. Whatever it is that generates the poem builds and changes during the process, and the poet is often surprised and pleased at what happens. The following exercise, inspired by the first line (“It is morning because”) from a Robert Hass poem, incorporates that sense of discovering one’s own poem as it grows on the page.

- 1) Have students collect five words, one from each of these categories: 1. a noun naming a wild animal (preferably one whose habitat is near their own area); 2. an adjective from the list, but one not obviously connected with the animal, such as “wild”; 3. A noun naming a place in nature; 4. An adjective naming a color; 5. A noun naming a weather.
- 2) Tell them to choose either a concrete or abstract noun for their subject. For example, if the chosen noun is “childhood,” the first line of the poem will be “It is childhood because.....” That first line will be the first stanza in itself. Inform students that they will not use their subject word within the next five stanzas.
- 3) Before they start writing, share the “autumn” poem that uses the words *goose*, *hesitant*, *field*, *silver*, *wind*. Discuss how the words are used in ways that connect with autumn.

It is autumn because

**wind** is sending  
messages of leaves  
down the sidewalk

and slanted light  
falls lazily across  
tired **fields**.

A **hesitancy** rising,  
as the season turns  
its face once again

toward the cold,  
and the **silver** eye  
of the pond watches

for the first  
migratory **geese**  
of September.

- 4) If you have already presented the lesson, “Playing With Titles,” take them through a process of titling this poem. Students’ suggestions have included “Slideshow Of Autumn,” “Waiting For Hunting Season,” and “Two Months Before The Election.” One student

suggested that the first line, "It is autumn because," should become the title and left out of the body of the poem. This is an excellent idea when considering titles for some poems; sometimes a first line makes the perfect title and a smooth transition from the title to the poem.

5) Give them adequate time to write. This exercise might take two class periods. If so, start the next class finishing the writing and the titling, then end with a sharing and feedback.

**Sample Poem** (Word list: *kingfisher, lonely, beach, white, rain*; Subject: Absence)

### **Remembering You Boarding The Plane**

It is absence because

cloudless skies have forgotten the **rain**

and the path from the woods  
to the **beach** is dry as a fishbone picked over by gulls.

Even **kingfisher**, laughing spirit of the place,  
has lost his humor, his quick wings  
taking him far from these reeds, where I stand watching

the wind whipping **white** capped waves onto a desolate shore

and a **lone** freighter from Asia getting smaller and smaller.

*Jesse Deniere, 11<sup>th</sup> grade*

