

## Playing With Titles (For Middle and High School Students)

Through this exercise, students will be introduced to a different way of titling some poems and discovering the layers of connections their poems embody. (The exercise is an adaptation of an experiment Robert Hass explains in the chapter, “Images,” in his book, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. It is based on the dynamics of a Soviet filmmaker’s practice of juxtaposing seemingly unrelated images in films.) This exercise should cover two class periods.

### First Day:

1) Write this short image on the board:

From the leaf-littered  
courtyard, slender birches  
cast their lean shadows  
across the library carpet.

2) Ask students what title they would give to this image. Responses might be “Autumn,” “Birch Trees Through The Windows,” “Shadows On The Carpet,” etc. Read the image several times, each time with one of these titles. Tell them these are good titles, but you are going to introduce another possibility for creating a title.

3) Jot down and underline these categories on the board: Current News; Recent Books Read; Favorite Songs/Musicians; Movies; Personal/Social Concerns; Encounters With Others. Have them jot down one or more things they would connect with each category. Do the same with your connections on the board. Take about five minutes.

4) Create a title from one of your category connections, something like “Remembering The Homeless Lined Up At The Shelter In Seattle,” and write it above the image. Then read it aloud. Ask them how the title might connect with the images. The “leaf-littered courtyard” might suggest the condition of dying; the “slender birches” might infer hunger; the “lean shadows” might imply hunger and hopelessness.

5) Tell them to consider the image their own and create a title from their categories. After about five minutes ask for results, then have them read the image with the title. These are samples from classes: “After Breaking Up,” “First Semester of Senior Year,” and “While Reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel.”

6) Prepare them for the second part of the exercise by encouraging them to be observant of the world, especially visually, from this moment until meeting again tomorrow. Capture an image and hold it.

### Second Day: Writing their own image with an uncommon title

Review the idea. Remind them that their image should not be long, but rather a kind of “snapshot” of an observation. Encourage them to avoid referring to themselves in the

image. Tell them to use the category approach for about three different titles. When they share, ask them to read the image three times, with a different title each time. Enjoy!

### **Sample Poems:**

#### **Senior Party**

Tonight trees flail and whirl  
to the screams and howls of wind  
and the moon is a strobe light  
catching the craziness.

#### **Driving To School And Hearing News That Six More U.S. Troops Were Killed In A Roadside Bombing**

Just beyond the turn  
to the Tacoma Mall,  
a twisted red Harley Sportster  
and a crumpled Dodge Caravan  
sprawl across I-5, gleaming  
in morning light and dirty snow.

