

Fighting Words Poetry Workshop: Writing in Response to Current Events

Lesson Overview:

In this workshop, you will explore how poetry and journalism can highlight underreported stories. Underreported news stories are stories that cover issues that are important, but are not getting the attention they deserve.

You will read poems written by young poets that respond to news stories, and then write your own poem using an underreported news story of your choice.

You can enter the poem you write into the Fighting Words Poetry Contest for the chance to win a cash prize and be published on the Pulitzer Center website! For complete contest information and guidelines, please see page 5 of this document.

Goals:

By the end of this workshop, you will be able to...

- explain what an underreported story is, and identify examples
- analyze how journalists and poets bring attention to underreported stories
- write a poem that includes lines from a news story in order to bring attention to an underreported story that is important to you

Step 1: Answer the questions in the table below.

1. Watch this video . Then, explain in your own words: what is an <i>underreported story</i> ?	
2. Share three examples of underreported stories, or topics you think should get more attention.	
3. How can you raise awareness about underreported stories that matter to you? Consider different ways in which people share stories.	

Step 2: Explore an underreported news story.

1. Read [“An Indigenous Village Works To Save a Brazilian Forest, Seed by Seed.”](#) an underreported story by Daniel Grossman and Dado Galdieri for *The Washington Post*.

Story excerpt:

The men and women started off with their chief by truck, riding several miles until the road from their small village became too soft for the truck’s tires. They then kept going on foot, walking in single file across a muggy plain of knee-high emerald grass.

The savanna’s slight trees provided little shade, but the heat didn’t matter given their mission.

“Listen to me carefully,” the chief’s daughter, Neusa Rehim’Watsi’õ Xavante, told an outsider accompanying the group. “The love we feel for the plants and the seeds make us walk under the scorching sun without complaining.”

Most of the Xavante people live in a forest known as the Cerrado, which covers almost half of the central Brazilian state of Mato Grosso. It has exotic flora and fauna seen nowhere else. Conservation biologists call it the most biologically rich savanna in the world, with 5 percent of the world’s plant and animal species.

Yet during the past three decades, vast expanses of the Cerrado have been cleared and replaced by industrial plantations of soy, corn, and cotton.

There is a movement to help restore the Cerrado’s forest and bolster the community’s fortunes by selling seeds gathered on its land. “With the seeds, we will reforest,” explained chief José Serenhomó Sumené Xavante. “That’s why we need native seed.”

“The non-Indigenous people are destroying the Cerrado and don’t understand nature,” the chief’s daughter Neusa said. Collecting seeds helps to heal the damage that’s been done.

After reading the story, write down:

A 1-3 sentence summary of the story	
Two feelings you have in response to this story	
One feeling you think a person in the story might be feeling	

Step 3: Analyze a poem written in response to the news story you explored.

Read [“There is a Forest”](#) by Sabrina Wang, a sixth-grade poet. Sabrina wrote in response to the news story you just read, and she included several words and phrases from the news story! Try to notice these words and phrases while you read the story.

After reading the poem, write down:

1. What words and phrases came straight out of the news story?
2. What lines jump out at you as important, interesting, and/or beautiful?
Line 1: _____
What I like about this line: _____
Line 2: _____
What I like about this line: _____
Line 3: _____
What I like about this line: _____

Step 4: Read or watch an underreported news story of your choice.

Now it's your turn to choose an underreported story that matters to you!

Take some time to explore headlines (story titles), images, and article summaries. Choose a news story that you care about—you will be writing your poem in response to this story.

You can find all news stories at pulitzercenter.org/stories. TIP: you can sort stories by “Issue” (the themes of the stories) and by “Country.” Please note! Some stories may have disturbing content. Please choose your story with the support of an adult, and let them know if you want to talk about your feelings about the story after you explore it.

Here is a list of suggested news stories to get you started! Choose one for your poem.

Stories for Grades 3 and up:

- [No School, No Hair Cut: One Girl’s Journey Through One of the World’s Longest COVID Lockdowns](#) [Photo, text]
- [Disaster Aid Running Out As Pakistan Struggles To Recover From 2022 Floods](#) [Video, text]
- [Illinois Students Struggle To Find Halal Food](#) [Photo, text]
- [Saving Wildlife: Education Key to Changing Mindsets](#) [Video, photo, text]
- [San Diego Pays a Lot for Abundant Water. Tijuana Pays a Different Price for Water Scarcity.](#) [Photo, text]
- [Taking Care of Each Other: Madison Communities Respond to Food Insecurity in the Age of COVID](#) [Text]

Stories for Grades 6 and up:

- [Heaven to Hell, Blue Skies to Pain: the Lament of Iraq’s Climate Migrants](#) [Photo, text]
- [In a Small Eastern Shore Community Descended From Slavery, a Grassroots Affordable Housing Model Expands](#) [Photo, text]
- [Thousands of Migrant Workers Died in Qatar’s Extreme Heat. The World Cup Forced a Reckoning](#) [Video, photo, text]
- [Cost of a KitKat: Big Brands Leave Sugar Farmers at the Mercy of Climate Extremes](#) [Photo, text, graph]
- [How an Activist Group in Brooklyn Is Empowering Latina Cleaning Workers](#) [Video, text]
- [Tam's Comeback: Diary of First Visit Home After Transitioning](#) [Photo, text]
- [To Fully Vaccinate Population, Ghana Faces Scarcity and a Troubled History](#) [Audio]
- [With New Unions, Argentina’s Domestic Workers Fight Their Way Out of Poverty and Insecurity](#) [Photo, text]

Stories in Spanish

- [Lilia: defender la fauna acuática del Amazonas es defender el mundo](#) [Foto, texto, video]
- [Una empresa minera amenaza la vida del oso andino en Colombia](#) [Foto, texto, video]
- [Los pulmones de la Tierra: África central - República Democrática del Congo](#) [Foto, texto, video]
- [Cómo un Grupo Activista de Brooklyn Está Empoderando a las Trabajadoras de la Limpieza Latinas](#) [Video, texto]
- [Joane: acabar con el plástico y el fuego destructor es posible](#) [Video, foto, texto]

Step 5: Gather words and phrases from the news story, and use them to start writing your poem.

Once you have chosen a story, use the worksheet on the next page to write down the title of the story you chose and the name(s) of the journalist(s) who reported the story.

Read or watch the story. While you read or watch, copy and paste words and phrases that jump out at you as important, interesting, or beautiful. These should be phrases that capture the feeling of the story, important information you want to share, and/or a powerful image. You can write down both full sentences *and* shorter phrases. You may need to read/watch the story more than once!

Step 6: Write and revise your poem!

Use the worksheet on pages 7-8 to write your poem. Remember to incorporate at least one line from the story you selected into your poem, and to respond to the overall theme of the story. Then, use the checklist on page 9 to help you edit/revise your poem.

OPTIONAL: Record a video or audio clip of yourself reading/performing your poem!

Step 7: Enter your poem to the 2023 Fighting Words poetry contest using the form at pulitzercenter.org/poetrycontest.

The form will ask for some basic information about yourself. You will also need to include the name and contact information of your teacher, or another adult in your life.

You will upload your poem to the form as an attachment. You will need to save your poem as a Word Document or PDF (please do not submit a Google Doc). Please do not include your name, school, or other identifying information in the attached document containing your poem. The **contest deadline** is Sunday, May 15, 2023 at 11:59pm EDT.

If you have any questions, please email education@pulitzercenter.org.

Fighting Words Poem Writing Worksheet

Write an original poem that includes at least one line from the underreported news story you read/watched on the Pulitzer Center website. The poem must be related to the main topic(s) of the story. This worksheet will help you get started!

Title of your chosen article:

Name(s) of the journalist(s) who reported the story:

Words and phrase from the Pulitzer Center story:

Write down words and phrases that stand out to you as interesting, emotional, or beautiful while you explore the story. These should be phrases that capture the feeling of the story, important information you want to share, and/or a powerful image.

Form those words and phrases into complete lines.

Choose three of your favorite words/phrases from your list above, and write them into a complete line of poetry, or a sentence. Here is an example from Sabrina Wang's poem:

Line from the story: "with the seeds, we will reforest"

Lines from the poem: "There is a forest / where the trees are *dying*, / but with the seeds, we will reforest."

Your Poem

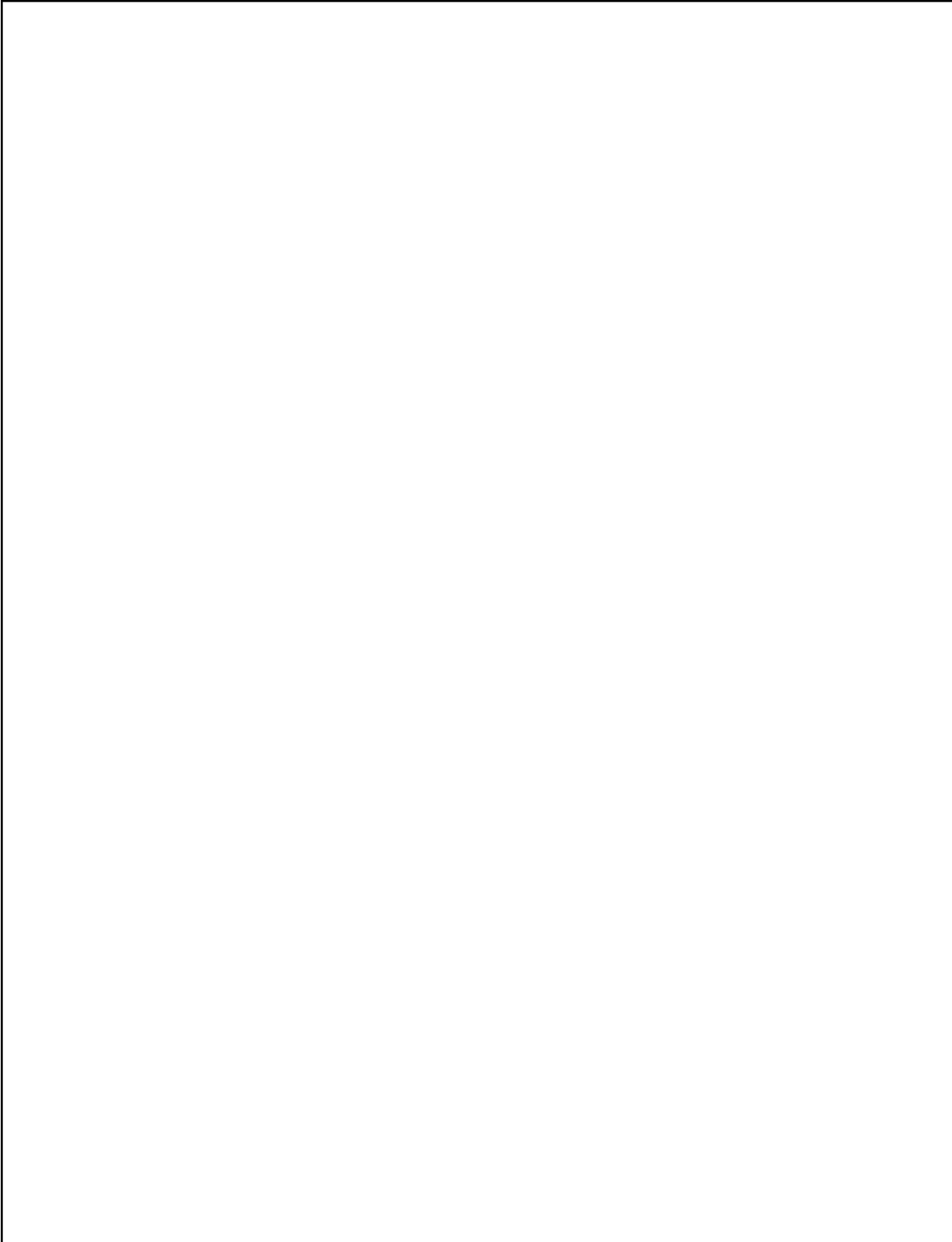
Use the words and phrases from the story you have gathered, and the lines you have begun forming, to write a complete, original poem of your own!

Title of your poem:

Epigraph:

Use this format: *With lines from "STORY TITLE" by JOURNALIST'S NAME, a Pulitzer Center reporting project*

Poem:



Reviewing Your Poem

Directions: All poems get better with revision! Ask yourself these questions while you re-read your poem, and identify areas you may want to work on more. When you have reflected on the question, check it off.

1. How successful is my poem overall?

Questions to ask yourself:

- How do I want people to feel when I read this poem? Have I chosen the best words to lead them to feel this way?
- Have I chosen my words carefully? Have I double checked their definitions?
- Have I read my poem aloud and listened to how it sounds?

2. Have I successfully included words and phrases from a Pulitzer Center story, and responded to the topic of that story?

Questions to ask yourself:

- Have I chosen phrases that add something important to the poem?
- Are the phrases included in the poem smoothly, so their presence feels natural?
- Does my poem call attention to the underreported news story I explored?

3. Does my poem treat its topic and the people affected by that topic with respect?

Questions to ask yourself:

- Why did I choose this story? How can I make a personal connection to the story?
- Why am I writing from the perspective I have chosen? What other perspectives could I choose, and how would those choices change the poem?
- If the people featured in the story I have chosen read my poem, how might they feel? Am I treating their voices and stories with respect? If someone wrote a poem like this about me, my story, or my community, how would I feel?