

Fighting Words Poetry Workshop: Writing in Response to Current Events

Lesson Overview:

In this workshop, you will examine the intersections of poetry and journalism. You will have the opportunity to explore under-reported news stories, analyze poems that respond to those stories, and write your own poems using a pressing story of your choice.

Poems produced in this workshop can be entered into the Fighting Words Poetry Contest for the chance to win cash prizes and publication. For complete contest information and guidelines, please see page 4 of this document.

Objectives:

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

- explain the connection between journalism and poetry
- analyze the connection between a poem and the news story by which it was inspired
- make a personal/local connection to a Pulitzer Center news story
- write a poem that includes lines from a news story

Discussion Questions:

1. What is an <i>under-reported story</i> ?	
2. What under-reported stories are you aware of in other parts of the world? What about in your own community?	
3. How can you make people aware of the under-reported stories that matter to you?	
4. What is the role of journalism in raising awareness? What is the role of art and poetry?	
5. How are journalism and poetry similar? How are they different?	

Reading/Listening/Watching:

1. Watch 0:00-5:05 of the New York Times documentary [“Inside a Suicide Prevention Center in Puerto Rico.”](#) While you watch, consider: What makes this an under-reported story? Why should we care about it?
2. Read and listen to the audio (1:55) of [“Permission”](#) by Noel Quiñones. While you listen, underline any lines you hear that you heard word-for-word in the documentary.
3. Discuss the poem:

1. What lines jump out at you as important, interesting, and/or beautiful? Copy them here.	
2. What is the subject of this poem? What under-reported stories can you identify?	
3. In what ways is the poem similar to the documentary? In what ways is it different?	
4. How does the speaker of the poem express personal connection to the subject matter?	
5. What poetic devices can you identify in the poem? (Metaphor? Repetition? Alliteration?) Choose one and explain how it contributes to the poem.	

4. What do you think Quiñones’s reference to “119 syllables” means? To find out, read his commentary on the poem:

“In the aftermath of Hurricane María, Puerto Rico has been struggling to rebuild and been denied federal grants to do so. While reporters and news stations have focused on people’s access to food, water, and electricity we are seeing a new crisis develop. The New York Times published a mini documentary entitled ‘Inside a Suicide Prevention Center in Puerto Rico’ at the beginning of January highlighting the mental health crisis now taking hold. As a third generation Puerto Rican, I have never been able to shake the pain of being from a place that is not quite a country and not quite a state. We have always lived in a precarious identity and while many state Hurricane María as the beginning of our traumas, we have suffered since America’s invasion 119 years ago.” —Noel Quiñones

Now, consider:

- What does "119 syllables" refer to? How is this related to the content of the rest of the poem?
- Does Quiñones's commentary change your perspective on the poem in any way? What about your perspective on how poetry can respond to under-reported stories?

More Model Poems:

1. Look through the Fighting Words poetry contest winners and finalists from [2020](#), [2019](#), and [2018](#). All of these poems were written by students in grades K-12. Choose **two poems** and read them in full, then skim the news stories the poets wrote in response to.

2. Respond to the following questions, using evidence from the poems you chose to read:

First poem

1. What lines jump out at you as important, interesting, and/or beautiful? Copy them here.	
2. What is the subject of this poem? What under-reported stories can you identify?	
3. What poetic devices can you identify in the poem? (Metaphor? Repetition? Alliteration?) Choose one and explain how it contributes to the poem.	

Second poem

1. What lines jump out at you as important, interesting, and/or beautiful? Copy them here.	
2. What is the subject of this poem? What under-reported stories can you identify?	
3. What poetic devices can you identify in the poem? (Metaphor? Repetition? Alliteration?) Choose one and explain how it contributes to the poem.	

Selecting Your Story:

Now it's your turn to choose an under-reported story that matters to you!

1. Take about 10 minutes to explore headlines, 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 eligible news stories at pulitzercenter.org/stories (TIP: you can sort stories by “Issue” (the themes of the stories) and by “Country”). Here is a list of **suggested news stories** to get you started!

Stories for grades 3 and up:

- [In Isolation, Abby Dreams of Space](#) [Video, illustrations]
- [Afropunk Brings the Black Lives Matter Ethos Abroad](#) [Photo, text]
- [Florida Farmers Tell of Overcoming Pandemic Obstacles in 2020](#) [Text]
- [Lily's Story: My Day in the Pandemic](#) [Illustrations, text]
- [How Will History Museums Remember this Moment?](#) [Text]
- [Down from the Mountains: Millions of Chinese Kids Are Parenting Themselves](#) [Video]

Stories for grades 6 and up:

- [Performing to an Empty Times Square: New York's Costumed Performers](#) [Photo, text]
- [The People's Newspaper: How *The Navajo Times* Is Covering COVID-19 in the Most Under-Connected Part of the U.S.](#) [Video, text]
- [Humanity: The Protest Photos You Don't See](#) [Photo, text]
- ['Even If You Are Missing a Foot, Missing a Hand, You Must Live,' Says Haiti Quake Survivor](#) [Text]
- [LGBTQ Migrants in Europe: Forming Communities](#) [Photo, text]
- [COVID-19 Kills Twice as Many in Mississippi's Poorest Counties—Areas Where Slavery Was Concentrated](#) [Text]
- [Ballet and Bullets: Dancing out of the Favelas](#) [Video]
- [Afro-Puerto Rican Identity Explored in 'Afro-Latinx Revolution: Puerto Rico' Documentary](#) [Video]
- [How Stigma Makes It Harder to Fight Epidemics](#) [Text]
- [Meet some of the millions of women who migrated recently, risking everything](#) [Photo, text]
- ['We Can't Be Selective on What Black Lives Matter and What Black Lives Don't,' Says Philly Race and Gender Activist](#) [Text]
- [The Bold Plan to Save Africa's Largest Forest](#) [Text]

Stories for grades 9 and up:

- [Memory and Trauma: Hong Kong's Exiled Protestors](#) [Photo, text]
- [Undocumented in the Pandemic: 'Nowhere Else to Go'](#) [Video]

- [Unbroken Courage: Examining the Remediation of Cambodia's 'Mental Health Crisis'](#) [Video, photo, text]
- Criminalizing Mental Illness: [Part 1, the problem](#) and [Part 2, some solutions](#) [Audio]
- [Lost and Found: The Story of Land-Grant Universities](#) [Text]
- ['Here They're Safe': The Girls Club That Emerged When Kenya's Schools Closed](#) [Photo, text] *Content warning: Sexual violence
- ['SHOT' - Police Shootings](#) [Text, video recording of theater] *Content warning: Anti-Black violence
- [Coming to America: It's Not Like the Movie](#) [Text]
- [Misgendering, Sexual Violence, Harassment: What it Is to Be a Transgender Person in an Indian Prison](#) [Text] *Content warning: Sexual violence
- [Valley of Unrest: Kashmir Under Siege](#) [Text]
- [Prying Eyes: Police Use of AI and Facial Recognition in Minority Communities](#) [Text]
- [Philippine Fishermen Stranded at Sea by Pandemic: 'We Think About Jumping Overboard'](#) [Text]

2. Once you have chosen a story, **refer to the worksheet at the end of this document**, called “Fighting Words Worksheet.” Write down the title of the story you chose and the name(s) of the journalist(s) who reported the story.

3. Read or watch the story you chose. **While you read or watch**, copy and paste lines that jump out at you as important, interesting, or beautiful. These should be phrases that capture the feeling of the story. You can write down both full sentences *and* shorter phrases.

Creating Your Poem:

1. Use the second page of your “Fighting Words Worksheet” to write your poem. Remember to incorporate *at least* one line from the story you selected into your poem.

2. OPTIONAL: Record a video or audio clip of yourself performing your poem!

3. **Enter your poem** to the 2020 Fighting Words poetry contest using [this Google Form](#). The form will ask for some basic information, and you will upload your poem to the form as an attachment; you will need to save your poem as a Word Document, PDF, or another text file. The **contest deadline** is Saturday, May 15, 2021 at 11:59 pm EST.

Prizes:

- 1st place: \$100, publication on the Pulitzer Center website
- 2nd place: \$50, publication on the Pulitzer Center website
- 3rd place: \$25, publication on the Pulitzer Center website
- Finalists: Publication on the Pulitzer Center website

If you have questions about these guidelines or if the Google Form is not accessible to you, please email hberk@pulitzercenter.org.

Fighting Words Worksheet

Select a Pulitzer Center story and integrate at least one line from that story into an original poem of your own. Make it personal. Show that you care. Make the reader care.

Title of the news story you selected:

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

Line(s) from the Pulitzer Center story:

Your poem: