



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2014 Volume II: Playing with Poems: Rules, Tools, and Games

The Sestina: Having Fun with Form and Content

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Overview

"...you engage in form, you don't choose it. It isn't an arrow in your quiver; it's an arrow in you, and it quivers; it's a kind of love." — James Cummins

The idea of sitting down to write a poem in a certain form gathers scorn from some writers: it makes the act more trivial, more of a game. "Serious poetry" should come from within and assume the form that suits it the best. We know, however, that young writers often don't have this inner force that writes their poetry. When directed to write a poem, they sit and stare at the blank page with no idea where to start. Do I rhyme? When do I go to a new line? What should I write about?

Writing in a particular form gives students a starting point: because there are some rules, they are freed from the oblivion that is a blank sheet of paper. They can engage with a form and allow it to guide them toward creating something beautiful. More importantly, writing in a form – writing poetry at all, really – allows students to become better at reading it. Instead of looking at the poem as a puzzle or a code, they will see it as something that has been created to inform and entertain. Or even just delight.

The first sestina I encountered was "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" by John Ashbery. I read it and had that feeling – one that language nerds like myself feel often and that we, as teachers, hope our students will feel even once – of excitement about a piece of writing. Something magical was happening and I wanted to read it again, read it to others, live in it, create it myself. The poem begins:

The first of the undecoded messages read: "Popeye sits in thunder, Unthought of. From that shoebox apartment, From livid curtain's hue, a tangram emerges: a country." Meanwhile the Sea Hag was relaxing on a green couch: "How pleasant, To spend one's vacation *en la casa de Popeye*," she scratched Her cleft chin's solitary hair. She remembered spinach... ¹

The language grabbed me immediately. I didn't know what a tangram was (a Chinese puzzle), but I liked that it sat next to Spanish and spinach, chin hairs and shoebox apartments. There was also something intriguing about the way the narrative – even in its first two sentences, allows us to peek behind a curtain. We get to see another side of Popeye and his crew. He sits in thunder? The Sea Hag casually mentions hanging out at her archenemy Popeye's *casa*? It was like a behind-the-scenes reality show. I didn't want to look away. Then, the

next stanza unfolded, introducing the beginning of the sestina's pattern:

...And was going to ask Wimpy if he bought any spinach.

"M'love," he intercepted, "the plains are decked out in thunder

And it shall be how you wish." He scratched

The part of his head under his hat. The apartment

Seemed to grow smaller. "But what if no pleasant

Inspiration plunge us now to the stars? *For this is my country.*"

Being unfamiliar with the sestina's form on my first read, I couldn't pinpoint the pattern that was emerging, but I felt it – the poem seemed to circle around itself, but it still changed. The repeated words weren't used in exactly the same way, but shifted almost imperceptibly as the narrative moved forward. Rather than slap the reader in the face with structure, the rules of the sestina instead seemed to nudge.

This unit focuses on the sestina because of its seemingly intricate, but actually simple rules. Students will analyze the way the form's structure allows content to come alive in a different way than it might have in a sonnet, a free verse poem, or in prose. The way that form supports and even manipulates content will lay the basis for the higher-level analysis these students will encounter in later English classes. Ultimately, I hope they will learn that the poem isn't something to fear — it is something to play with, to engage with, that can open doors to the exploration of language and self. Poetry can be something they (not just their English teachers) can feel excited by.

Rationale

Allderdice is the exemplar of a post-integration urban high school: diverse and academically strong; "Dice" is rich with the kind of experiences we want our children to have in school. This picture changes a bit, however, when one looks more closely at the population of students who attend and the programs in which they participate.

Allderdice is situated in Squirrel Hill, an affluent, mostly white and predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Pittsburgh's East End. The school draws students from all over the city through its eight feeder neighborhoods and the pre-engineering magnet program. Taken together, these students form one of the more diverse high schools in the city. As of October 2013, 49% of Allderdice's students were Caucasian, 39% were African American, 5% were Asian, 2% were Hispanic and 4% identified as multi-racial. ² Socioeconomically, the student body ranges from the children of doctors, lawyers and professors to those from less advantaged households: 52% of students in 2013-14 were on a free or reduced price lunch plan. ³

Allderdice is also unique in the city of Pittsburgh because of its large population of gifted learners. In the 2013-14 school year, 382 of Allderdice's 1327 ⁴ students were designated gifted, and were enrolled in the Centers for Advanced Studies (CAS) program, which offers courses restricted only to those who have been

identified as gifted. The CAS program creates an interesting divide within the school – it is almost like two high schools in one. Students in the CAS program have traditionally been white and more privileged than those in the mainstream program, and CAS students spent most of their day – 5 out of 8 classes – until recently, only with other gifted CAS students.

In 2012-13, PPS introduced the Gifted and Talented model. In addition to those identified as gifted by IQ, CAS courses are now open to "students who demonstrate high achievement and meet specific course requirements." ⁵ One of the drivers of this policy change was to diversify the pool of students in CAS classes. In the 2013-14 school year, out of 382 gifted students, 295 were white.

The class for which I am writing my curriculum unit is English 1 CAS. This is the highest level English language arts course available to 9th grade students in the district and is now open to many more students because of the talented model. Because of the change in demographics of this class, both racially and by mixing students who are labeled gifted and labeled talented, there is a need for curriculum that is engaging to diverse groups of learners and that better prepares students for the high-level thinking they will do in their future coursework.

Currently, in the advanced curriculum in our school district, we are reforming on two lines: adjustment to the expectations of the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards as well as increased preparation for and participation in Advanced Placement courses. Both of these goals demand more rigor in the ELA curriculum. While the CAS curriculum has always been considered rigorous and has included higher-level thinking, there are elements that are not as closely aligned in rigor to the Common Core and Advanced Placement expectations. English AP teachers at Allerdice indicate that students arrive in the AP Language or AP Literature class typically underprepared in analyzing how authors purposefully use language to construct arguments or to reveal theme.

Aside from these reasons, there is another that is more practical — poetry needs to be fun. It is typically the unit that teachers dread teaching because of the barrage of complaints they are met with: I don't get it! Why do we need to learn poetry, anyway?!

Instead of introducing students to poetry — and in general, to the high school English classroom — through processes that ask them to decode or interpret poems to take away some higher truth, this unit hopes to encourage students to focus more on the purposeful use of language and the way that a poem's form — in the case of this unit, the sestina — can support its content. This careful look at language and form will increase the rigor in the 9th grade curriculum and hopefully lay a foundation for the skills they will need in higher levels of English.

Many students think that writing just ends up on the page and is either powerful or not. The goal of the English Language Arts education ought to be to teach students that authors who are truly great at their craft make very careful decisions about how to use language and structure for rhetorical reasons. This will make students better readers and writers; it will prepare them to enter a world where people are attempting to get them to believe something new and are using language to do it. The sestina offers a compact and engaging way to see that writers have fun with language and manipulate it for a specific purpose.

Content Objectives

Sestinas have had quite a turbulent history; Medieval Renaissance writers lauded the complicated artistry required to produce one and the way the form allowed, almost mathematically, to "devise an elegant solution" to a problem. ⁶ Late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers, up until the 1950s, used the poem as a call to tradition and a representation of the professionalism of their craft. ⁷ At the same time, others have lambasted the form, calling it "as obvious as an ear," and suggesting that it is the playground of bad "creative writers." ⁸ The sestina generates considerable poet-on-poet hate, particularly on the question of whether the lines should be free or metered verse. ⁹ To put it in a different way: the sestina is that friend you keep around who sometimes seems cool, but also serves as the group's punching bag. Despite the torment, however, the sestina doesn't go away; it has experienced a resurgence in the 21st century and, I believe, deserves a place in the high school English classroom.

The sestina has a complicated structure and, historically, was used by troubadours to demonstrate their linguistic chops. A form with particular rules about word placement – as the sestina demands – forced poets to demonstrate their skill with language as they created a piece that still made sense despite the intense repetition of only a few words. Writing a pleasing sestina showed one's mastery of wordplay. Though modern poets have used the sestina to explore different topics and are writing sestinas for different reasons than the troubadours did, the intricate structure remains a playground for language.

The sestina consists of six stanzas of six lines, then a three-line stanza called an envoy, or "send-off." ¹⁰ The intricacy of the form lies in the way its end words are repeated; the six teleutons, or the words at the end of each line, will be the end words of the six lines in each stanza; however, the order changes. The six words are then used both in the middle and ends of the three lines of the envoy ¹¹. Take, for example, the opening stanza of Sir Philip Sidney's poem "Ye Goatherd Gods," one of the first sestinas written in the English language:

Strephon. Ye Goatherd gods, that love the grassy mountains, (A) Ye nymphs which haunt the springs in pleasant valleys, (B) Ye satyrs joyed with free and quiet forests, (C) Vouchsafe your silent ears to plaining music, (D) Which to my woes gives still an early morning, (E) And draws the dolor on till weary evening. (F) ¹²

The first stanza establishes the teleutons — mountains, valleys, forests, music, morning, evening — in the pattern ABCDEF. The remaining six line stanzas will mix up those teleutons in this order: FAEBDC, CFDABE, ECBFAD, DEACFB, BDFECA.

To make this pattern clearer, here is the second stanza of Sidney's poem:

Klaius. O Mercury, foregoer to the evening, (F) O heavenly huntress of the savage mountains, (A) O lovely star, entitled of the morning (E) While that my voice doth fill these woeful valleys, (B) Vouchsafe your silent ears to plaining music, (D) Which oft hath Echo tired in secret forests. (C) ¹³

Sidney's poem is a double sestina, so there are twelve stanzas of six lines before the envoy. It, however, mimics the typical "send off" structure of three lines with two of the teleutons in each line: AB, CD, EF.

Strephon. These mountains(A) witness shall, so shall these valleys(B), Klaius
These forests (C) eke, made wretched by our music (D), Our morning (E) hymn this
is, and song at evening (F). ¹⁴

Older versions of sestina, including Sidney's, were very rigid in the requirements for the teleutons — they were repeated in strict order in the stanzas following the first and were nouns with a trochaic form (in which the first syllable is stressed and the second unstressed). ¹⁵ Sidney typically adhered to lines of iambic pentameter, while Italian writers Petrarch and Dante manipulated the meter to include eleven syllables. .

The sestina was "invented" by Provençal writer Arnaut Daniel in the late medieval period. Daniel was "highly regarded as a traveling troubadour," so much so that he was immortalized by Dante's *Divine Comedy* as the model of a vernacular poet. ¹⁶ After Sir Philip Sidney introduced the sestina to English, it was used frequently up until the late 19th century. The sestina then fell out of fashion in the early 20th century only to experience a resurgence in the 1930s, led by W.H. Auden. ¹⁷ The 1950s has been called "the age of the sestina" — it was widely used then and, because of its intricate form, was seen as a kind of "professionalization" of poetry ¹⁸ .

The scholar Stephen Burt asserts, however, that the use of the sestina form in more contemporary poetry expresses dissatisfaction with that professionalization ¹⁹ . Poets in the late 20th century assumed that their work would have some larger meaning in society — that it could "disclose organic preverbal truths," incite movements, link writers to tradition and empower the writer. When this promise was not delivered, the use of rigid, arbitrary forms like the sestina was in reaction to the fact that poetry largely served only as entertainment. ²⁰ Burt argues that contemporary writers choose the sestina because it allows them to revel in craft and technique while disavowing "tradition, organicism and social or spiritual efficacy." ²¹ The sestina fits this need particularly well because its form, though it contains specific and intricate rules, doesn't mimic a natural logic or conversational pattern. Because it doesn't seem as natural, it appears as more of a game. By playing this game – writing poems in which the structure seems to be used just for fun – writers can satirize the kinds of poems where form is a "logical consequence of the poem's content." ²² By appearing to make a conscious choice about form – rather than it seeming to flow naturally from the content – was a way for writers to mock these "serious" poets whose work was attached to a higher purpose, whose sonnet form seemed to arise naturally because of what they had to say.

As a result of this almost mocking attitude toward poetic tradition, the content of contemporary sestinas is often whimsical and sometimes hilarious. Writers have embraced the playfulness of the form and its demonstration of a mastery of craft that still entertains. And entertain they have. Contemporary incarnations of the sestina run the gamut from serious to playful and are, at times, irreverent. The web-based literary magazine *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* ran a sestina column for several years, with titles like "The One Where the Cake Ignites" (the narrative of a lost Friends episode that uses the six main characters' names as the teleutons), "Sestina for the Q Train," "Francis Bacon Sestina," and "Hitler Sestina." There are some in this anthology that play with the sestina form, including "WTF Sestina," with each stanza an electronic chat conversation and teleutons including omg, lol, hahaha and, of course, wtf.

The sestina has also met with other "newfangled" poetry techniques that further confound the idea that this poetry could ever be taken seriously. Sharon Mesmer, known as a "flarf" poet (one who uses search engine strings to generate found poetry) wrote a sestina (a flarftina, if you will) called "Super Killer Rooster Assault Kit" based on end words scavenged from Urban Dictionary — the tamer ones including "crapsauce," "Orville Redenbacher" and "maximum nacho." ²³

While the content of some of these sestinas are probably a little bit too inappropriate for the high school classroom, they echo the larger point that Burt made above: if poets feel that they can no longer do something "important" with their poetry, then it might as well do something fun. The contradiction that the sestina presents — a rigid, formal structure that allows, and has been used, for lighter topics and tone — is what makes it perfect for the high school classroom. Additionally, despite the seeming silliness of the form's repetition, it still allows for a deep analysis of the way that form can support content and create sound and feeling in a poem. Try as contemporary writers might to avoid and mock the form-from-content tradition, the playful, intricate structure does seem to naturally align with and support the content of the poem. The "game" in the sestina still allows students an opportunity for deep analysis — integral to the high school language arts education.

The light-hearted treatment of the sestina in contemporary poetry partially conceals its ability to be a form that contributes to the meaning of the content it communicates. One of the first questions we ask students at the onset of a poetry unit is what is a poem? This question often results in a back-and-forth of unsuccessful answers: lines instead of paragraphs? Rhyme? It's about feelings (my personal favorite)?

James Cummins claims that one of the things the sestina does particularly well is create sound, and this is one of the elements that I believe makes a poem a poem. ²⁴ Though he uses a rather vibrant image to convey what it is — like a "large, wounded, bleating animal" — he claims that while other poems are busy being "good," the sestina has room to make sound, whether or not it is pleasing in a traditional way. ²⁵

Another valuable aspect of the sestina, according to Cummins, is that it "calls attention to its existence in time." ²⁶ While many poems (he focuses on the sonnet) attempt to hold time in its place, to express a certain moment, the sestina has way of eschewing the moment and allowing a change or development to happen. Cummins refers to this effect as a "mirror" — though the same words appear in each stanza, they always appear in a different way. ²⁷ The reader never experiences the exact same feeling and is, in fact, forced to interpret a change because the words do not appear the same way they have before.

This resistance to stasis can also be attributed to the number of stanzas and the way that the envoy concludes the poem. The development of the sestina comes from a "number mysticism" that was important in the Medieval Renaissance, but that most poets and readers do not consider consciously when reading today. The number six was considered a weak number while the number seven represented mystical wholeness. If the sestina had a complete seventh stanza, the movement of the end words would revert back to the ABCDEF order it assumed in the first stanza. Instead, it has six stanzas and ends with a "conclusion" that, while it wraps up the poem, does not complete the cycle. It literally does send the poem off on a continuation of its journey. ²⁸

A poem that demonstrates the way content and form in the sestina suggest movement in time is Elizabeth Bishop's "Sestina." She opens the poem with the setting of a scene — a bucolic home:

September rain falls on the house. In the failing light, the old grandmother sits in the kitchen with the child beside the Little Marvel Stove reading the jokes from the almanac, laughing and talking to hide her tears. ²⁹

This opening stanza's content establishes time in many ways — time of year (September); time of day (failing light); a person's place in the progression of a lifetime (grandmother, child); even the naming of the stove places it in a specific time. The almanac places the poem in time in a complex way: it is a book that

prognosticates the future for farmers and can also be a book that records statistics about the present (which quickly becomes the past).

Because of its placement in the order of the teleutons, the almanac quickly begins to take on a different life and move the poem forward. Though in the first stanza it is an object that the grandmother reads from, it moves to the end of the second stanza and is now called "clever" — it has assumed a typically human characteristic. In the third stanza it will now be the end of the first line — it must quickly go through another change or the poem will grind to a halt. The lines read:

Tidying up, the old grandmother hangs up the clever almanac on its string.
Birdlike, the almanac hovers half open above the child, hovers above the old grandmother...

The almanac has gone from a static object, though imbued with a sense of time, to "clever," to an animated thing that looms ominously over the child and the grandmother. The rapid repetition of the teleuton as it moves from last position to first creates a moment in the poem for each of the teleutons to develop. Though each makes some change in each stanza, I believe this rapid repetition facilitates — almost forces — the progression of the poem.

Cummins wrote that in some of the first verse that used repetition there is an early version of the sestina; though the form has changed, even then there was a sense of "circularity and completion."³⁰ Repetition can do more than emphasize. This is extremely important for students embarking on poetry analysis to understand and is a difficult concept to grasp. Because the words must move and serve different functions, the changing positions and therefore relationship of the words to each other allows this form to contribute more through repetition than emphasis.

Though there is not a clean completeness — we don't get a repeat of the teleuton structure of the first stanza — the envoy serves as a conclusion that sets the scene in the poem on its way:

Time to plant the tears, says the almanac
The grandmother sings to the marvellous
stove and the child draws another inscrutable house.³¹

The almanac has become the agent that "solves" the problem, albeit not completely (the child will continue to draw houses that cannot be interpreted, suggesting that the problem in this poem is not completely solved). This still moves the poem off on its journey beyond the page, giving a sense to the reader that more will happen and time will continue to march on.

In his discussion of the ways that the sestina form has been looked down upon by other poets, Cummins quotes Richard Wilbur's opinion that one of the few topics "suitable" for the sestina is obsession.³² While Wilbur makes this claim pejoratively, I believe that it is a positive aspect of the form. The repetition of the teleutons creates a feeling of obsession, but the journey the poem forces the reader to take allows that obsession to develop and carry importance beyond the negative connotation we typically associate with the word obsession.

One way that this idea of "obsession" is highlighted is when authors manipulate the teleutons — instead of choosing six different words, some choose to use the same word more than once or, in some cases, for all six of the end words. One poem that masters this strategy is "Like" by A.E. Stallings. As you may have assumed, the lone teleuton is the word like:

Now we're all "friends," there is no love but Like A semi-demi goddess, something like A reality tv star look-alike Named Simile or Me Two. So we like In order to be liked. It isn't like There's love or hate now. Even plain "dislike" ³³

Though this poem clearly obsesses over the idea of "like" — the way we approve of something, the way it punctuates our speech, the way that we are all the same, the author avoids stasis and redundancy by adjusting the way that "like" appears in each line and from stanza to stanza. Above, it is used as an idea, a preposition for comparison, a compound adjective, a verb, and its opposite idea, dislike.

These forms of "like" do not rotate through the poem in the same specific pattern as the teleutons normally would. For example, "Like" - the idea, given a name almost as if it were a Greek goddess — resides at the end of the first line of four of the stanzas. In the second stanza, the author introduces uses of "like" that were not present in the first:

Is frowned on: there's no button for it. Like Is something you can quantify: each "like" You gather's almost something money-like, Token of virtual support. "Please like This page to stamp out hunger." And you'd like To end hunger and climate change alike,

The "like" in the second line recognizes a modern usage associated with Facebook — in addition to merely approving of something, it involves the physical action of clicking a button.

As the poem progresses, "like" springs up in places other than the teleuton, most noticeably in the first line of the third stanza: "But it's unlikely Like does diddly. Like..." and after, there is a veritable frenzy of "likes" that supports both the idea of the author's (and our culture's) obsession with liking and being liked — it begins to feel like winds whipping into a tornado that we cannot avoid, so we must acknowledge. The envoy reads:

But as you like, my friend. Yes, we're alike, How we pronounce, say, lichen, and dislike Cancer and war. So like this page. Click Like.

We've ended up somewhere that we weren't before. Although the poem obsessed, it did not stagnate — it began a journey and almost returned to the ideas in the early part of the poem, yet did not quite complete the circle. We started out with artificial friendship and connection ("friends" a reference to the superficial relationships we hold on social media that are often not replicated in real life), but we've ended on a point that demonstrates the connection that we all do actually have, which this "liking" highlights to the chagrin of its critics.

The ability of the sestina to tolerate precise repetition (when the teleutons remain in the same form) and linguistic variation is one of its most dazzling qualities — for meaning as well as entertainment. This ability also lends itself well to vocabulary development in the classroom and showing students that poetry can do fun things with words and ideas — that it need not be stilted and stagnant, old and stuffy.

My favorite sestina - the one I mentioned in the opening of this paper, one that throws old and stuffy vigorously out the window — is "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" by John Ashbery ³⁴ The obsession, in this case, is a scene in the cartoon character Popeye's apartment in the city, and the sestina unravels a narrative rather than a direct meditation on a subject.

Ashbery also relies on the manipulation of the teleutons to give the poem a sense of movement and

development. In some cases, the word is merely altered linguistically — the word "scratched" takes on multiple shades of meaning — but in others, words are used in a metaphorical sense to convey a difference from their previous incarnation. In the first stanza, Popeye "sits in thunder,/ unthought of" and later on, Popeye's "duplicate father" throws "bolts of loving thunder" that disrupt the family's happiness ³⁵ .

Happiness (or unhappiness) is an important thematic idea in this poem, but the poem itself plays so artfully with language and narrative that it seems to almost resist a more specific "meaning" or takeaway. While this quality is certainly frustrating, particularly to student readers who are accustomed producing a deeper meaning of poetry on demand, it allows the reader to forget deep meaning and revel in wordplay. In the very practical sense, students could use this poem for vocabulary or word connotation development or to help stretch the words they use in their own writing.

Students can also investigate the way that language can contribute to the creation of a feeling in a poem. Part of this poem's dazzle is the way it combines mundane, natural language (country, spinach, thunder) with the more ornate (salubrious, unavailing). It also mixes formal language (henceforth) with informal and slang ("en la casa de Popeye" "out of earshot"). The way that these words dance around each other in the sestina's form holds them together despite their disparate meaning and formality; it also uses the juxtaposition of modes of discourse to make us aware that everything is said in a particular manner of speaking.

Another sestina that uses different modes of language to contribute to its meaning is "Bilingual Sestina" by Julia Alvarez. This poem documents Alvarez's struggle to master the English language and come to terms with her identity as a bilingual *gringa dominicana*.

In addition to exploring the predicament of being a bilingual woman, Alvarez uses the sestina not only to demonstrate her command of a non-native language, but also that she could master a traditional English language poetry form. In the case of a diverse classroom in which students may enter with language norms that are not the same as the "mainstream" Standard written English, this poem's content as well as Alvarez's ability to master the form and language will empower students as writers and participants in a language classroom.

Alvarez uses lexical variants — say and said, for example — to "flex" the form and truly show that she had mastered not only the language but one of its highest art forms. ³⁶ She selects her teleutons — said, English, closed, words, nombres, Spanish — in both languages and thus they work together to form "a singular aesthetic goal." ³⁷ They change their meaning and form to show the movement of time and her growth as a speaker and writer, as well as highlight her obsession with this element of her identity.

The idea of identity that arises in each poem leads into this curriculum unit's thematic topic — what things form our identity and how can we reflect those in our writing as well as use writing to develop them?

Students will read the poems above, focusing on the ideas of repetition (the effect of the repeated teleutons) and the way structure can reflect content (both through movement in time and the way that the form can reinforce an obsession that changes). The four poems will form the basis for the unit, but can be supplemented with other examples of the sestina that deal with identity. The end goal of the unit will be for students to write their own sestina that reflects some aspect of their identity and the way that aspect has changed recently in their lives.

While writing the sestina will present a considerable challenge for most students, I believe this meets many of the needs present in this class that I've outlined — the need for diverse perspectives, content that engages a

diverse group of learners and high-level analytical exercises. In addition, creating the final poem will allow students to begin the individual's journey that the rest of the English 1 CAS curriculum focuses on.

Strategies

Collaborative Writing

Because writing the sestina requires some intricate word work and may present a challenge to some learners, writing in groups will create a scaffold to students writing a sestina on their own in the culmination of this unit. Groups can be separated heterogeneously (a mix of high and low ability learners) or homogeneously (groups of similar ability) depending on how you wish to scaffold the activity.

Leveled Questioning

Asking questions can help students comprehend a complex text, however, they will typically need some direction to avoid creating closed or low-level questions. A simple strategy is to teach students three levels of questions.

Level 1 - Recall/Comprehension - Questions that ask students to remember something from the text or to prove that they have comprehended what they read. Typically the answers to these questions can be directly "pointed to" in the text; they do not require the reader to make an inference or assumption.

Level 2 — Interpret/Analyze — Questions that ask students to make an inference or assumption about a text or to explain how a literary device is working in the text and how it relates to the larger meaning. These questions often have more than one possible answer and must be supported with evidence, though that evidence will not directly answer the question (as in Level 1).

Level 3 — Evaluate/Connect — Questions that ask students to draw connections from the text to a larger thematic question. These questions COULD be answered without the text, but in the context of the classroom, students would primarily use the text in question to inform their answer. They may, however, synthesize the ideas from the target text with other texts.

This question-writing strategy can be used in conjunction with the two-column chart and inquiry discussion strategies below.

Two-column charts (close-reading)

This activity could be used both for at home reading or classroom work. Students create a two-column chart. In the left column, students record notes to help them keep track of what the poem is saying. In the right column, students record observations or questions at the various levels described above. For longer texts, students can focus on a specific chunk of the text that reveals devices or meaning that are intended to be the focus of the lesson. Likewise, if a poem or text is particularly long, this could be used as a way of making the text more manageable for a short lesson — different groups can focus on different parts of the text, then bring their ideas together in whole group discussion.

Inquiry-based Discussion

Discussion strategies in the English classroom come in many forms and go by several names (Socratic, whole group, share out). Inquiry-based discussion, in my mind, puts the bulk of the questioning and discussion management on the students. After some practice, students should be able to create their own questions and facilitate a discussion around a text with little input from the teacher. For students just beginning with the inquiry model, it helps to have a teacher-written question to begin discussion and to set the discussion length for 10-15 minutes. This will give many students a chance to participate but won't drag the discussion out. The teacher should supply the initial question and give students 3-5 minutes to write about that question, answering the prompt and using at least one piece of evidence from the text to support their answer. When discussion begins, in order to give students maximum control over the discussion while still keeping it orderly and productive, students can be assigned roles. These roles can include:

Facilitator – Manages the flow of discussion, bringing up new questions or asking students to participate if they have not or if participation is imbalanced.

Timer – Keeps time for the discussion and gives a warning when the end of the allotted time is nearing.

Tracker – Marks down who has participated, including when students use discussion moves and evidence.

Note taker – If you wish to make a record of the content of the discussion, a student can take notes as classmates speak. Students especially love doing this in front of the class (on the board or document camera).

It also helps students to have a way of keeping themselves accountable for what they are being asked to do in the discussion. Creating a simple rubric with places where they can check off what they have done not only helps them manage their own participation but also makes assigning a grade a bit simpler.

Discussion moves are sentence starters that facilitate a "discussion" rather than a read-around where students merely share their answers without connecting ideas to their classmates. It is extremely important to reinforce these moves, particularly with students just beginning with inquiry-based discussion, as their default mode will be "share to the teacher." Forcing students to consider how their response builds on the previous points will create more student-to-student talk and allow for a discussion that goes somewhere rather than standing still. Examples of these phrases include, "I agree with ___ because" or "I would like to add to ___'s response." These phrases should be created based on the needs of the classroom and made visible to students during discussion.

Activities

"Sestina" by Elizabeth Bishop - Exploring Repetition in the Sestina

Begin the lesson by asking students what they already know about repetition – what it is and why it is used in poetry. If you have high-level learners or have previously covered repetition, you can skip this warm up. After sharing responses, read the poem aloud at least twice, with the teacher reading at least once to model fluency.

Have students identify the teleutons (end words). Separate students into heterogeneous groups and ask students to use the Leveled questions/observations above to focus on only ONE of the end words. For example, if a group is focusing on the almanac, they should make observations, inferences or thematic statements about the almanac or write questions about the almanac only. Depending on your students, it may benefit them to spend a few minutes BEFORE this group work discussing what the poem is about, but don't belabor this discussion. The nuts and bolts of the poem should be revealed through their group discussion and through the process of asking questions.

After students have had 8-10 minutes in groups to create questions and discuss their focus word, reconvene as a large group and hold an inquiry discussion (see above) using their questions. Depending on the level of your students, you may need to guide students to eventually arrive at a point where they can make some sort of observation about the way the repetition of the end words is working in the poem. You should look for students to say something about a sense of movement, a change in meaning or development of "character" over the poem and a cyclical but incomplete feeling.

Have students conclude the lesson with an exit slip that allows them to gather their thinking about how repetition is used in the sestina. You can phrase this question based on the path of the discussion and what information you feel you will need for formative assessment.

"Like" by A.E.Stallings - Exploring Linguistic Variations in End Words

Introduce the lesson with a warm up/do now question on the board when students enter the room. The question should ask them to consider what they think of the way their peers use the word "like." After students have had a few minutes to respond in their notebooks, have students share their responses according to your typical routine.

Show students the Taylor Mali spoken word poem called "Like Lily Like Wilson." Afterward, lead a discussion in which students consider how the word "like" was used in the poem and how it connects to the ideas they discussed in the warm up.

Next, explain to students that the sestina they will read does not follow the typical "formula" and instead uses one word for each of the end words. This might be a good time to convey the objectives for the day, which include considering how the sestina form allows language to change in meaning over the course of the poem.

Read the poem at least twice aloud. At least one of the times should be a teacher read to model fluency. The second can be done by one student or a combination of students.

Ask students to count the number of times that "like" is used but means something different. An easy way to do this might be to create a two-column chart, with the first column for listing the words and the second for their meaning.

After students have recognized the different ways the word is used, show students some example sentences from the poem (or, you can write them yourself, but be sure to use "like" at least two ways). Have the students write sentences using their own repeated word that mimics the structure of the example sentences. This will allow students to play with linguistic variants in a controlled setting, as they may not be ready to attack a full sestina. For more advanced students, you could ask them to write a short poem that manipulates the meaning of one word.

Ask students to share their poems and wrap up with an exit slip that asks them the effect the repeated use of one word that changes meaning. Share out these responses if time allows.

Our First Sestina — Collaborative Writing

This lesson should be done after students have had some exposure to the form, but before they embark on writing their own sestina.

Divide students heterogeneously into groups of 3-4. Depending on the ability level of your class, you can either allow students to select their own set of six end words or you can pre-select them. If you choose to pre-select, write the words on index cards so that students will be able to manipulate them easily on the table or desk. Try to pick groups of words that have something in common, unless your students are up for the challenge of connecting words that have a weaker association with each other.

Ask students to discuss possible connections between the words with their group. They should come up with several possibilities and, if time allows, have each group share their brainstorm.

Before students begin writing, review the movement patterns of the end words and the stanza structure of the sestina. The end patterns should, at the very least, be displayed at the front of the room for reference during writing and given to each group on a handout.

Give students ample time to work together to construct a sestina using the words they were given. You may want to have students write their poems on chart paper so that they can be displayed and used for reference as students embark on writing their own sestinas for the culminating project.

Resources

Bibliography for teachers

Burt, Stephen. "Sestina! or the Fate of the Idea of Form." *Modern Philology* 105, no. 2 (2007): 218-241.

An essay that considers the role of the contemporary sestina and its use by poets as a tool for reacting to the deprofessionalization of poetry.

Cummins, James. "Calliope Music: Notes on the Sestina." *The Antioch Review* 55, no. 2 (1997): 148-159.

An essay that considers the way obsession and change are inherent to the sestina form.

Hollander, John. *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

A reference book of English verse technique and form. Includes the sestina as well as many other popular and less widely used forms. Examples of each are written by Hollander himself.

Kinzie, Mary. *A Poet's Guide to Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

A book that explores the various ways that poetic craft contributes to creating meaning.

Wall, Catharine E, "Bilingualism and Identity in Julia Alvarez's Poem 'Bilingual Sestina,'" *MELUS* 28, no. 4 (2003): 131.

An essay that explores Alvarez's poem as a vehicle for the exploration of bilingualism and the mastery of a second language's vocabulary as well as craft.

Reading list for students

"Like" by A.E. Stallings

"Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" by John Ashbery

"Bilingual Sestina" by Julia Alvarez

"Sestina" by Elizabeth Bishop

Classroom Materials

Copies of poems

Index cards or paper for end words in collaborative writing activity

Composition paper

Projector/Document camera (if available)

Sentence starters for discussion moves

Chart paper

Timer

Attendance sheet for participation tracking

Notes

1. John Ashbery, "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," *Academy of American Poets*, 1970, accessed on August 15, 2014, <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/farm-implements-and-rutabagas-landscape>.

2. "Discover PPS: Pittsburgh Allderdice High School," *Pittsburgh Public Schools*, last modified October 2013, <http://discoverpps.org/school.php?id=301>.

3. Ibid.

4. Retrieved from internal data.

5. "The Gifted and Talented Identification Process," Pittsburgh Public Schools, accessed on July 15, 2014,

<http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/Page/827>.

6. Randy K. Schwartz and Rheta N. Rubenstein, "Another Verse, Changed from the First," *Math Horizons* 9, no. 2 (2001): 28.

7. Stephen Burt, "Sestina! or, The Fate of the Idea of Form," *Modern Philology* 105, no. 2 (2007): 219.

8. James Cummins, "Calliope Music: Notes on the Sestina," *The Antioch Review* 55, no. 2 (1997): 151.

9. *Ibid.*, 151-152.

10. John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 42.

11. *Ibid.*, 42.

12. Sir Philip Sydney, "Ye Goatherd Gods," Western Michigan University, accessed on August 15, 2014, <http://unix.cc.wmich.edu/~cooneys/poems/Sidney.sestina.html>.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. Mary Kinzie, *A Poet's Guide to Poetry*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 459.

16. Encyclopedia Britannica.

17. Burt, 219.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 220.

20. *Ibid.*, 221.

21. *Ibid.*, 221.

22. *Ibid.*, 222.

23. Alexandra Korcz, "Behind the Sestina: Sharon Mesmer on 'Super Rooster Killer Assault Kit,'" *Incredible Sestinas* (blog), December 11, 2013, <http://incrediblesestinas.com/2013/12/11/behind-the-sestina-sharon-mesmer-on-super-rooster-killer-assault-kit/>.

24. Cummins, 150.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 154.

27. *Ibid.*, 152.

28. *Ibid.*, 155.

29. Elizabeth Bishop, "Sestina,"

30. Cummins, 150.
31. Bishop.
32. Cummins, 150.
33. A.E. Stallings, "Like,"
34. John Ashbery, "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape."
35. Ibid.
36. Catharine E. Wall, "Bilingualism and Identity in Julia Alvarez's Poem 'Bilingual Sestina,'" *MELUS* 28, no. 4 (2003): 131.
37. Ibid., 132.

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