

Concrete Poems

Teachers Notes

A creative writing project for KS2

Max Literacy Award 2021

Partners: The Turnpike CIC & Westleigh Methodist Primary School

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Introduction



Image by Livia Lazar

This is The Turnpike Centre. It was built in 1971 as a space for art and learning for the community in Leigh, Greater Manchester. It is a bold brutalist building, a modern and aspirational design for the former industrial town. Today the centre still houses a busy local authority library, alongside a gallery space, studio and community garden.

In 2021, The Turnpike CIC collaborated with Westleigh Methodist Primary School and Manchester-based writer Elmi Ali to deliver 6 workshops for pupils from KS2. The sessions drew inspiration from the architecture of the concrete building, including an unusual cement façade created by the modernist artist the late William Mitchell. The young people explored using their senses, emotions, and imaginations to create new stories and poems for the building, as we celebrated its 50th anniversary year and considered what the future might hold for the Leigh community.

This resource shares session ideas for KS2 teachers to explore using modernist design and architectural spaces as a source of inspiration for creative writing. Each idea can be used as a one-off session, or as part of a longer project. Sessions can be delivered in a classroom context, though we would strongly encourage offsite visits to sites as part of longer-term projects to stimulate imaginative writing in response to real spaces.

These teachers notes accompany a Powerpoint presentation, and should be used in conjunction with the slides in a classroom setting.

Activity 1

Doodling with words

Get ideas flowing by starting each session with doodling and free writing. Just like a doodle drawing, a free write is unhindered by the rules of 'good' writing, and as such children can be encouraged not to worry about punctuation or grammar, and to let their minds wander. Using a 'stream of consciousness' approach is particularly useful for any pupils who struggle to come up with ideas for writing – for example, if they think 'I don't know what to write' then this should be written down in the free write. Once they begin writing, they shouldn't stop until the time is up.

Aims:

- To inspire a love of writing
- To generate ideas and vocabulary for other written pieces
- To increase confidence in sharing writing in the group context

Materials:

- Pens or pencils for each child
- An interactive whiteboard, with the Concrete Poem presentation Slides 3-11
- A book/ pad for each child

Directions:

30 mins

1. Provide the children with their equipment, including a dedicated book. It can be explained that this book is for ideas, and therefore they do not need to worry about neatness and punctuation.
2. Share the Slides 4 and 5 'Introduction' and 'A closer Look' to provide information on artist William Mitchell and his concrete frieze.
3. Discuss vocabulary relating to the topic as a group and write new or unusual words on the whiteboard.
4. Slide 6 'Doodling' shares some doodles inspired by Luca Shaw, an artist commissioned by the Turnpike to create artwork. Slide 7 encourages the pupils to have a go at creating their own doodles. This will help them to look closely at the designs and patterns on the concrete frieze.
5. 'Doodling with words' Slide 8: For the first free write the concept should be explained. On Slide 9 there is an example free write by a pupil from Westleigh Methodist Primary School, which demonstrates how the free write can be a stream of consciousness.
6. Set a timer – we suggest three minutes as an ideal time to retain concentration. Let them know when they have 1 minute remaining.
7. Once the writing time is completed, encourage all children to share their work aloud, celebrating interesting takes on the topic, good vocabulary and phrasing and speaking skills.

Feedback

8. Ask the question 'How did you find that, easy, hard or medium?'. When responding pupils are invited to find a simile to describe how difficult/easy the exercise was for them. For example, 'Hard – like tying my shoe-laces with my hands behind my back' or 'Easy – like falling out of bed'

Activity 2

Sensing Space

As architecture is a 'whole body' experience, the exercise encourages young people to think about each of the five senses in relation to the space they are occupying. Through the activity the pupils will gather their own source material based on their observations. The activity could take place around the school building or be used on a school trip to an interesting architectural space in the local area. Using their written notes, the young people will create a Haiku poem.

Aims:

- To introduce the five senses as a source for creative writing
- To encourage mindful writing, drawing on experiences and observations
- To support an appreciation of inspirational architectural spaces
- To support an understanding of the structure of a Haiku poem.

Materials:

- An interactive whiteboard with Concrete Poems presentation slides 12-18
- Printed copies of Slide 14 for each child (the 'Sensing Spaces' worksheet)
- Pencils/pens for each child
- A book/writing pad for each child

Directions:

1 hour

1. In preparation for the session, decide some locations for the activity to take place. Children will need to be able to sit quietly in the space and look, listen, feel. With permission, it is particularly effective if they are given the opportunity to occupy spaces they wouldn't usually be permitted to spend time in – stairwells, corridors, shared areas, cupboards. In a less familiar space, the pupils may find it easier to be observant of their surroundings.
2. Distribute Slide 14 'Sensing spaces' as a worksheet, with pens/pencils and paper to complete the task. Ideally pupils will have 15-20 minutes to write a couple of responses for each 'sense' and move between spaces if they wish to.
3. Once returned to the classroom, encourage individuals to share their writing with the rest of the group.
4. To begin to 'Create a Haiku' at Slide 15, invite a young person to read the example poem aloud.
5. Slide 17 offers some suggestions for constructing Haikus using their senses writing. Allow a further 15-20 minutes to select one of their sentences and create a poem, with 10 minutes for refining their work or sharing aloud.

Sensing Spaces Activity

Find a space in the building that you feel is interesting, or where you can sit and feel calm and inspired.

On your paper draw:

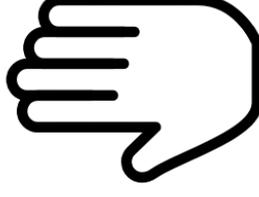
an eye

a nose

a mouth

an ear

a hand



Around each shape write down some ideas of all the things you can see, smell, taste, hear and feel **right now**

Activity 3

Modern Mouthful

Inspired by the form of The Turnpike's brutalist building, this activity draws on the use of geometry in Modernism through a grid formation writing exercise to create a monostich poem. Slides 19-23.

Aims:

- To increase vocabulary knowledge
- To develop sentence structure, organisation and editing skills.
- To introduce the monostich poem form.

Materials:

- Printed out Word Sheets
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- Plain A4 paper
- Pencils

Directions:

1 hour

1. Pupils should be given a grid $\frac{1}{4}$ of the printed Words Sheet and cut out their words along the grid lines.
2. Allow 10 minutes for the pupils to order and play with the words they have selected.
3. Discuss the words, are there words they don't understand? How might they be used in a sentence?
4. Explain the objective: To use the cut-out words to create some new writing.

Re-organise the words into a grid 4 x 5. Once you have placed these words in the grid, you will be tasked with creating sentences/short poems along the columns and rows of the grid by inserting your own connecting words.

5. Allow 10 minutes for the pupils to place the words onto the grid and stick them into place on a piece of landscape A4 paper with a glue stick. Pupils should ensure that the grid is well spaced out so that there is room for additional words to be added above, below and to each side. The rows and columns do not need to make sense initially.
6. Allow 20 minutes for the pupils to write in their connecting words to create sentences/poems along the rows and then columns. Finally, for those that complete this, pupils can attempt to create further sentences on diagonals.
7. At the end of the session, invite pupils to share any sentences they particularly like with the rest of the group.
8. Favourite poems can be written up into finished work or developed further.

Modern Mouthful Work Sheet

path	concrete	machine	tree
happy	listen	draw	clean
shelter	breathe	horizon	linear
laugh	sleep	brutal	sing
window	loud	sweet	strange

eye	stairs	road	sister
sad	bird	thunder	hot
sunshine	open	shoes	talk
yellow	dream	collapse	moss
depart	silent	element	form

change	light	roof	earth
awake	people	engine	grey
poetry	scrape	structure	weave
quietly	flying	arrive	ball
make	winter	doorway	essence

tiny	steps	dark	melody
face	lock	future	hear
clock	plans	quickly	beauty
sky	community	shift	absence
soil	recite	twisting	welcome

Activity 4

Picturing Poems

Photography is a versatile and accessible creative tool.

Aims:

- To develop observational skills
- To expand vocabulary, particularly adjectives
- To develop an appreciation of architecture as a source of inspiration
- To encourage confident use of photography as a tool for creative writing

Materials:

- An interactive whiteboard with Concrete Poems presentation slides 24-30
- Tablets or other digital camera devices for each child or pair
- Paper/workbook for each child
- Pens or pencils for each child
- Optional: Printer, glue and scissors to collage printed photographs

Directions:

1 hour

1. Pre-session preparation should include planning a route around the school/building that will cover areas of photographic interest. Weather permitting, a route outdoors would yield interesting results.
2. After sharing the objectives, lead the pupils on a photography trail around your designed route. Allow 15-20 minutes to ensure the pupils have a chance to get to grips with the capabilities of their devices and explore different photographic views – close ups and angles whilst searching for light and shadow, interesting textures, unusual shapes in the architecture.
3. Once photographs have been collected, the pupils should select their favourite image. Invite the pupils to study their selected photographs and create a descriptive word list for their chosen picture.
4. To create their descriptive paragraph, pupils remove the photograph from view. Allow 5 minutes, to encourage as much writing as possible from memory, then a further 10 minutes to refine their writing. Paragraphs can be shared with the rest of the class.

Bonus Activity

GIF Poem

Aims:

- To introduce animation as a tool for sharing creative writing

Materials:

- Tablets/computers with access to the internet
- Printed copies of the GIF Poem Worksheet.

1. Pupils should navigate to <https://brush.ninja> in a web browser. You may find it useful to prepare by familiarising yourself with the tools. A handy tutorial is available on YouTube [here](#).

GIF Poem Worksheet

Welcome to Brush Ninja. This is an online tool for creating your own GIF animations. GIFs are short, animated images that are on a continuous loop. You may have seen them used to share memes or jokes. We are going to use them to share our poems!

Intro

1. Go to <https://brush.ninja>
2. If asked, select that you would like a Square Canvas.
3. You will see a white square, this is your canvas for creating the animation. You will also see tools along the top of the page, with brush sizes and colours down both sides.
4. At the bottom of the canvas is another smaller square and a button that says 'Add'. These are your 'frames'. To make an animation, you will need a series of frames one after the other, when they are played together they become a GIF animation.

Get started

1. First, we will create a background. If you have access to them, you could select one of the images from your Picturing Poems activity. To do this click on the  icon at the bottom of the canvas, and select 'Use your own image', then find where the photo is saved on the computer or tablet and upload it.
2. However, you can also create your own background using the brush tools. Have a play! Try to fill in all the white space.
3. Now you will want to use this background to create multiple frames for your animation. At the bottom of the canvas, click on the smaller version of your background and then select  this will duplicate the frame. You will need 6-10 frames.
4. Now select the first frame – the one on the furthest left-hand side. This is the frame for the first word of your poem.
5. Select the T for 'text' tool at the top of the page. You will have options to change the size of the text, and the font (the style). We suggest large text is better, as it will be easier to read.
6. To write your word select the 'write' tool, the pencil icon. A new box will appear for you to type your word. As soon as you select 'use' the word will become a stamp, for you to position on your background however and wherever you like. You can also change the colour, size and font again.
7. If you aren't happy with something you have done, select the 'back' arrow from the tools along the top of the page.
8. Once you are happy with the first frame, select the next frame from the bottom of the page. This presents you with your next blank background, ready for you to input your next word in the poem by selecting the 'write' tool again. Keep going until you have created a frame for every word of your poem!
9. You can check how your GIF poem is looking at any time by clicking the 'play' button.
10. Once your GIF is complete, select 'Export' to save the animation on your computer or tablet.

Get creative

1. If you have mastered the basics, why not get creative, add different images, backgrounds and drawings into your frames to create really interesting effects, and to illustrate your poem. For example, if you used the word 'night' you might draw stars!