Poetry in motion

The best words in the best order

In this activity, the interactive whiteboard is used to view a poem which has been de-sequenced; the class then works together to put the text back into the 'correct' order. Any reasonably short text could be used as long as it has a logical development.

Instructions, directions and a well constructed argument would all be appropriate. Some stories, or extracts from stories would work well; others would be unsuitable as there would be multiple possible permutations. Short narratives such as fables can provide good material (see lesson 6 for a more in-depth consideration of possible approaches).

Discussion is a central part of the activity. Why do we think a particular line goes in a particular place? What are the features which lead us to think that? What other features should we examine? In a pre-1914 poem there are likely to be clues derived from rhyme and rhythm as well as from meaning. More recent poetry may provide far fewer clues, or the clues may be more subtle.

In the process of solving this 'puzzle', much of the poem's meaning will be examined, as well as its structure. Importantly, this will be done along the way, as part of the process, rather than as a series of questions, notes or explanations.

This lesson activity should be used in conjunction with the SMART Notebook™ file 'Poetry in Motion.notebook'.

✎ Notes

Suggested activity outline

- Display one line of the poem and ask what might be deduced a) about the complete poem; b) about its position in the poem.

- Display the page with the whole de-sequenced poem; spend some time reading the lines and answering any important questions about, say, vocabulary.

- Ask students to note down their ideas for what might be a first line, a final line or any groups of lines which go together.

- Take suggestions from the class and start to reconstruct the poem; look out for clues such as rhyme and verse structure as you go along.

- Once you have a possible sequence, read the poem through and see what the feeling of the group is. If there are seemingly equally good alternatives, try them.

- When you judge the moment appropriate, display the page with the original poem. Without your working version alongside it may be hard to know immediately whether the two are identical or not. Give some time for students to look and decide if the class did, indeed, get it right.

- Give out printed copies of the poem for them to check against the version you have just worked on.

SMART specific

Having located your poem, whether from the Internet, scanned in or simply typed, save it as a word processed document. Now copy it and open SMART Notebook. Paste in the poem and make another copy on a new page. You can do this by copying and pasting to a new page or cloning the original page.

Go back to the first page and rearrange lines or verses. This time you will use cut and paste. The lines can be arranged as you please. Select one line of the poem and copy it on its own, into another blank page.
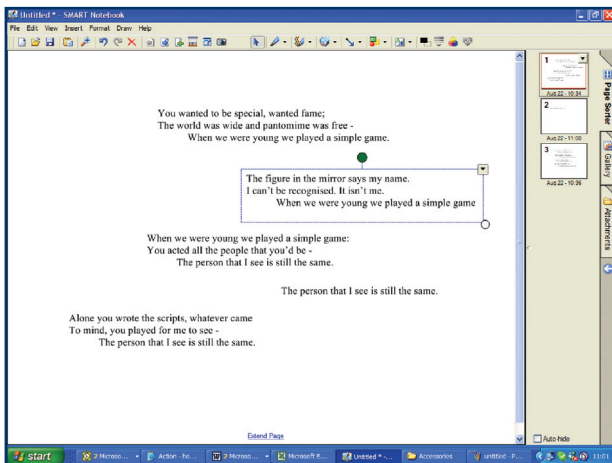
Example 1

Extension activities

Present students with some poems which might not have an obvious sequence, e.g. descriptive poems, poems which contain lists, stream of consciousness writing, etc. The objective here is not to make things difficult or to try to guess the right answer but to investigate the processes which might have gone into the creation of the poem and to compare alternative versions. How many possible alternative versions are there? (See the short extract below).

Use some dialogue from a Shakespeare play. This will bring into consideration not only the poetic issues already discussed, but also issues of character and plot.

If you are feeling brave, encourage students to bring you poems (or other texts) which they have de-sequenced. How good are you at solving them? Share your thoughts and your difficulties with them.

I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids

Sprouting despondently at area gates.

They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,

And along the trampled edges of the street.

Notes

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