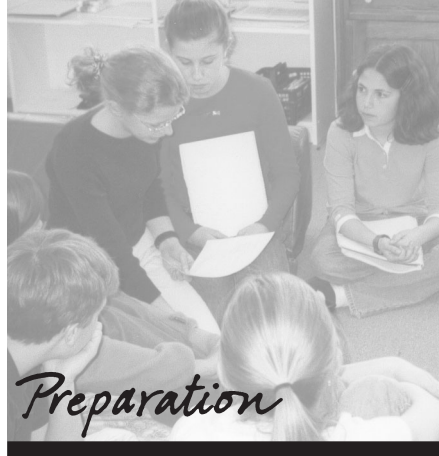


Twenty Actions



LESSON

A FRIDAY
IN MARCH

- ✓ Overhead transparency of your “Twenty Actions”—a list of observations of your actions over one weekend that could become poems
- ✓ Overhead transparency of a poem about one of the actions on your list
- ✓ Optional: Overhead transparency of “Twenty Actions That Could Become Poems: A Sampling of Student Ideas”
- ✓ Optional: Photocopies of seventh and eighth graders’ action-inspired poems: “Beach in Winter” (Erin Witham), “The Perfect Opportunity” (Meg Benton), “Soccer Again” (Jacob Miller), “Beauty” (Nora Bradford), “Still” (Jed Chambers), “Mirage” (Marnie Briggs), and “Ode to Ovaltine” (Siobhan Anderson) as examples for students of what’s possible

What I Was Thinking

As I write, Billy Collins is the eleventh poet laureate of the United States. Collins became a favorite of my students in a heartbeat: his poems make them feel welcome like no others.

Five of my kids bought, or received as requested holiday gifts, Collins’ book *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001). When I assigned students to read an essay by Collins about “the companionship of a poem”—about the joys of memorizing poems and carrying them with us—they decided they wished to do this, and among the poems they memorized were “Snow Day,” “Morning,” “Budapest,” “Introduction to Poetry,” “Walking Across the Atlantic,” and “Afternoon with Irish Cows,” all by Billy Collins. And in what struck me as the oddest and funniest outcome of their fandom, the word *accessibility* showed up on numerous individual spelling lists. It’s the term students learned to use to describe what they like best about poems by Billy Collins.

So when I photocopied and asked them to read a profile of Collins that appeared in the *Washington Post*, they were struck by a poetry assignment he gave to his adult students at Lehman College—to make a list of twenty actions from their everyday lives that could become poems. The profile cited two examples Collins gave of actions from his own life: he moved his dog’s head off his pillow, and, by mistake, he ran over an American flag.

I told the kids I was interested in trying this, as another way to generate topics for my poems. So that weekend I observed my everyday life, kept a running list of things I did that might be the stuff of poetry, and showed the twenty actions to my kids as Monday’s mini-lesson. Clearly, here was another way to add to our lists of territories as poets.

“Billy Collins has written an American best-seller. By itself that’s not a startling statement—not unless you know that Billy Collins is a poet. Not to mention a good poet. Not to mention the poet appointed by the Library of Congress to the post of poet laureate of the United States.

There are lots of theories about why Collins’ poetry is so popular with ordinary Americans. Highbrow critics say it’s because his poems are cute, a novelty act. One critic wrote, “Collins writes like a man with a pile of those poetry refrigerator magnet sets who happened to get pretty handy with them,” and he even compared Collins to Jerry Seinfeld.

But other critics and many readers love Billy Collins’ poems. They’re simple and inviting to enter, often funny, frequently moving, sometimes startling, and generally deeper and more mysterious than they first appear, with the serious and the trivial mixed together—just like in real life.

Last week I read a profile of Billy Collins in the *Washington Post*. The reporter described a poetry class Collins taught at Lehman College in the Bronx. He read to his students a list of twenty actions he’d taken the day before. They included running over an American flag by mistake and moving his dog’s head off his pillow. Collins assigned his students to keep a list of twenty of their everyday actions that could become poems.

Last weekend I tried Collins’ assignment, to see if and how it might inspire me as a poet, and I love where it led me. Here is my list of twenty actions, twenty things I did last weekend that could become poems. . . . [see Figures 6-1 and 6-2]

The exercise showed me moments in my life that are raw material for personal poems. Even better, I think many of the moments have the potential to go beyond the personal. As a writer, I don’t know where to start, there are so many ideas that intrigue me.

Because making a list of twenty actions gave me so much material to mine, I learned it’s something I want you to do, too. Turn to the next clean page in the territories section of your writing handbooks and record this heading

Twenty Actions of Mine that could become poems

This weekend take your writing handbook home. Fold it open to this page and leave it, along with a pen or a pencil, in a conspicuous spot—maybe on your desk, the kitchen counter, the living room sofa. Observe yourself. If you notice yourself engaged in an action that might have poetic potential, jot it down. If you're away from home and do something that has potential, make a mental note to remember it, so you can record it when you return. Don't limit yourself to twenty actions, but you must observe and record at least that many, because twenty will push you beyond the obvious to the quirky, the deep, the surprising, and the intensely personal moments of your days.

By way of example, here's a sampling of the actions that a group of seventh and eighth graders observed over a weekend in March. Read along with me. . . .

Can you envision how these everyday actions might contain the seeds of interesting poems? In many of them there's already a tension between what was expected and what was delivered. Some of the actions fix a moment of beauty or satisfaction. Others suggest a possibility, or bring a smile of recognition. All of them find art in the everyday. Let me show

TWENTY ACTIONS THAT COULD BE POEMS

Watching Toby teach Anne how to parallel park, feeling glad it's not me

Walking on Salt Pond Road with Anne and reciting "Stopping By Woods" by Robert Frost for about the millionth time

Examining my face in the mirror in the morning—the lines, pores, broken veins, age spots

Adding a sixth tea mug to the collection of dirty ones on my writing desk—a sign of a good writing week

Reading in bed again at 1:30 A.M., unhappily wide awake

Holding my calf stiff for half an hour because Rosie's napping on it and I love being her pillow—the feeling of her trust

Sophia's parents calling: they'll pick Anne up, so for once we don't have to carpool to Damariscotta: the moment of greatest joy of my day

Looking at frozen rose bushes for signs of life

Dining on take-out shrimp pattay in winter on an island in Maine: 21st century America

Awakening Anne from a late afternoon nap—her face like baby Anne's for just that moment

Removing the toenail polish I applied before Captiva: waving good-bye to February vacation

Not getting dressed on Sunday 'til 4:00: my definition of weekend

When the week's laundry is done: *the feeling of fresh laundry*

Lying across our bed with Anne on Sunday afternoon, both of us reading poetry (M. Oliver and Heaney's *Beowulf*)

Being told by an airline phone recording that I'll have to wait seventeen minutes for a live person, and waiting

Anne trying to curl into my lap, all sharp knees, elbows, hip bones, and ankles, both of us trying so hard to cuddle

Figure 6-1 Nancie's Twenty Actions List

TWENTY ACTIONS THAT COULD BECOME POEMS: A SAMPLING OF STUDENT IDEAS

Styling my hair with the usual gel and finishing spray, and not once thinking about the ozone layer
Blowing bubbles in a glass of Ovaltine
Playing Go Fish backstage at *Peter Pan*, all of us in thick stage makeup
Falling asleep with my dog on my stomach
Practicing the same piece *over* and *over* on my violin
Eating a very sweet orange
Smelling spring
Riding my bike over snow
Finding bookmarks with messages on them left behind in books
My cat crawling all over my pen when I'm trying to write
Kicking a soccer ball for the first time since the fall
Making brownies with my sister
Reading a whole book in one sitting
Shopping for makeup at Rite Aid
"Kissing the surf" on the beach in winter

Finding my old stuffed animals under my bed—growing up
Eating my birthday cake: when the last piece is gone, so is my birthday
Trying on a dead, 105-year-old lady's hats
Eating Skittles by pouring out the bag and making a rainbow
Walking outside barefoot in a tank top because it's a sunny day, then freezing
Trying to put on a too-small sweater
Waking up to wind and rain and staying in bed because it's so nice to be warm and listen to the weather outside
Loading firewood at sunrise
Trying on my dad's shoes
The moments just before falling asleep—that silence
Mom hitting a bird when we were riding in the car
Eating a chocolate biscotti dipped in cold milk
Squishing crab apples underfoot

TWENTY ACTIONS THAT COULD BECOME POEMS: A SAMPLING OF STUDENT IDEAS LESSON 6

Overhead
Students' Twenty
Actions list

you a handful of the poems that resulted. . . .

Have fun with this assignment. Look hard at the mundane world around you. Make sure these are your actions, rather than an observation of others in action, so your *I* voice can be strong. Bring your lists of twenty actions to the mini-lesson on Monday. Questions?

FOLLOW-UP LESSONS

After walking the inside of the circle and checking their homework, ask students to meet in groups of three or four and talk to one another about the actions they captured. Then reconvene the circle, ask writers to skim their lists and select the one or two ideas that seem to offer the best potential as art, and do a quick whip around the group, asking kids to share their best ideas. Assign, as new homework due in two days, a draft of a poem about one of the twenty actions.

6

ON SALT POND ROAD WITH FROST

I know whose woods these are.
A thousand visits made them mine.
A thousand visits and Robert Frost.

Anne's first summer I strolled her down the shaded lane
and said the words to the woods and her,
a lullaby for a baby
from the country of white houses.

Other days I passed alone, head down, hands in pockets,
walking hard to beat the blues
'til shocked out of myself by the emerald of the forest floor—
a reminder I could stop, breathe,
keep the promises tomorrow.

Once I walked this way in winter with my mother,
who doesn't live among poems or woods.
I said Frost's words and told her I knew the urge—
to disappear among dark and lovely trees,
to rest on the snow forever—
and stopped her short.
So it's a poem about death?
Maybe. And choosing life, I think.

Today I hiked by the woods with my grown-up girl.
We didn't stop—she had places to go.
But we said the words together and marched to their beat—
a reflex on this road like wishing on a star.
Whose woods whirled past us, as we walked Frost's truth: Earth is the right place for love.

—Nancie Atwell

Figure 6-2