



Climate Poetry Lesson Plan

Topic:

Climate Writing Awards Poetry

Materials Needed:

- Audio (optional)
- Writing materials (for students)
- Internet

Standards:College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards:

- R.CCR.5. and R.CCR.6. Reading: Craft and Structure (grades 9-10)
- R.CCR.5. and R.CCR.6. Reading: Craft and Structure (grades 11-12)
- R.CCR.7. and R.CCR.9. Reading: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (grades 9-10)
- W.CCR.1., W.CCR.2., and W.CCR.3. Writing: Text Types and Purposes (grades 9-12)
- W.CCR.4., W.CCR.5., and W.CCR.6. Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing (grades 9-12)
- SL.CCR.2. Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration (grades 6-12)

Duration:

Flexible

Grade Level(s):

9-12

Outline:

1. Warm Up (20 Min)
2. Connect (10 Min)
3. Describe (10 Min)
4. Listen (5 Min)
5. Consider + Reflect (10 Min)
6. Write (20-30 Min)
7. Revise (30 Min)

Climate Poetry - Overview

What does the climate fight need? *“We need artists, writers, poets, and filmmakers: they can dismantle the walls of numbness.”*

So states climate scientist [Joëlle Gergis](#), one of the lead authors of 2022’s [IPCC Report](#). The Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez agrees. “Poetry can inspire and empower us towards real change,” he says, referring to the subject of his groundbreaking course on ecopoetry at the University of Hawai‘i. Santos Perez promotes action through poetry, leaning into the artform’s deep roots in advocacy. As the Poetry Foundation puts it, “poetry is commanding enough to gather crowds in a city square and compact enough to demand attention on social media.”

Dismantle numbness with your words, dear writers. Poetry about climate change has the ability to inspire, activate, connect, “[speak truth to power](#)”, and so much more.

1. Warm Up (20 Minutes)

This warm-up exercise is designed to help students experience *consuming* a poem before *producing* one—to borrow language from biology/life science as we embark on writing climate poetry. Students are invited to think about tone, form, shifts in perspective, and overall messages as they discuss two mentor texts written by other young poets.

If you are short on time, this step can be skipped.

1. Listen to the poems [“Archipelago”](#) and [“The Singing Lark”](#) while also viewing the text on the screen. These poems were each published in *Write the World Review*, the online journal for Write the World’s global community of young writers, ages 13-19.
2. Discuss as a class (or in pairs or small groups) how these poems look at nature and then, also humans. Why might the poets begin with nature and then turn to humans? What’s the effect on the tone of the poems and what’s the implication about humans’ behaviors, similarities and differences to nature, and relationship with nature? (Students can write short reflections before or after discussions to help form their thoughts to expand their thinking on these topics.)
3. Discuss as a class (or in pairs or small groups) how the form of each poem influences the readers’ experience of the poem. For example, [“Archipelago”](#) is written in pairs of lines that utilize enjambment, and [“The Singing Lark”](#) is an example of a sestina, a poem with a very specific pattern of repetition of words and lines. What do you hear as you listen to the recordings, or see as you read the words—what do you notice about these forms in relation to the content of the poems?

2. Connect (10 Minutes)

In his poem, “The Peace of Wild Things,” the American author, farmer, and environmental activist Wendell Berry writes about the solace he finds in the natural world—a countering force to anxiety and fear. Read the poem aloud as a class, and then have students respond to the questions below.

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

1. What place serves as a refuge for you in times of distress or uncertainty? This can be a place you go to physically, or a place you imagine or remember.
2. List 2-3 *specific* places that are in or connected to the natural world — this might be your backyard, or your front stoop, a bluff where you can take in a view of the sea, a specific tree along your street, a path in the woods...

3. Describe (10 Minutes)

Next, have your students pick one of the places they listed, and write about it, through the senses.

Prompt: Your World In Three Sentences

Bring to mind your chosen place. Now transport us there with three vivid and telling descriptions, each using a different sense: SIGHT, SMELL, SOUND, TASTE, or TOUCH.

Perhaps it's the feeling of the desert wind that defines this place for you, or the shoreline upturned by a spring storm. Perhaps it's the sound of the dogs howling or the hoot owls hooting. Perhaps the smell of forest duff or sea salt or the *absence* of smell after snow has coated your city block. Pick details that are particular and specific, and bring them to life with fresh language.

Ask for volunteers to pick one description/sense to share aloud.

4. Listen (5 Minutes)

** Note to educators: this step can be skipped if listening to the recording feels too emotionally challenging for your student group.*

[Link to interview](#)

Segments to play:

1. 4:28-5:22
2. 7:48-10

In this portion of the writing process, we'll overlay the place students have been writing about with the changes in the environment that have been taking place due to climate change. This is how a poem goes from being “about nature” to “effecting change.” What do you want people to know? What change do you want to influence? You can scaffold the experience for your students with guidelines for what to pay attention to, such as:

We're going to take a few minutes to [listen](#) to how one person—the writer Terry Tempest

Williams—writes about the western US landscape—specifically Utah—where she and her family have lived for generations. Williams is speaking with a reporter for *The New York Times*, Bianca Gaeber, about the wildfires that devastated parts of the Western US in the summer and early fall of 2020.

We'll listen to two short segments. First, we'll jump in when Williams is talking about her experience in Utah after the skies have filled with smoke and ash. Second, we'll listen to the section in which Williams reads a passage she's written, called "An Obituary for the Land", which really is an *obituary for the way that humans have been living, and a rallying call for a changed way*. Notice in these passages how closely grief is aligned with a commitment—a vow—to fight for change.

5. Consider + Reflect (10 Minutes)

Next invite your students to:

1. Consider how climate change's impact (see partial list of expected or observed impacts below), will influence the place you've been writing about. How will changes in temperature, snow or rain, biodiversity, sea level, etc, impact your physical place of refuge?
 - glaciers and ice sheets are shrinking
 - river and lake ice is breaking up earlier
 - plant and animal geographic ranges are shifting
 - plants and trees are blooming sooner
 - sea ice loss
 - accelerated sea level rise
 - longer, more intense heat waves
 - more severe hurricanes and storms
 - warmer winters
 - drought
 - forest fires
2. Now, reflect. When you imagine how the place you have been writing about will change as the climate changes, what comes up for you?

6. Write (20-30 Minutes)

Take the seeds of what you have already drafted and write a poem. From the strict sonnet to the unbridled free verse, all forms of poetry are welcome. Perhaps you will...

- Organize your poem into numbered stanzas as Craig Santos Perez does in "[Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Glacier](#)" and WtW's Akhila Bandalora does in "[Never Forget](#)".
- Write to a particular person (or generation), as Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner does in "[Dear Matafele Peinam](#)".
- Tell a story, the way Catherine Pierce does in "[High Dangerous](#)" and WtW's Amalou does in "[Small blaze in a roaring fire](#)".

- Write a “pledge of allegiance poem”, inspired by Terry Tempest Williams’ line: “Penned on my heart, I pledge of allegiance to the only home I will ever know.”

Thematic + Topical Guidelines

Perhaps your poem will...

- Draw attention to climate change’s threat: What part of the environment around you is worthy of attention and protection? The air in your city? The fire-prone hillsides surrounding your neighborhood? The kelp in the bay?
- Bear witness to change: Have you noticed any changes in the climate of your home country or region since you were a child? Do your parents or older relatives talk about changes since they were children?
- Spark emotion: Writing about your own response to climate change can help others get in touch with their emotions, fueling engagement and action.
- Inspire action through connection: What nourishes and sustains you? What connects you to the natural world? The ancient olive tree at your city’s edge? The glaciers that feed your region’s rivers?

7. Revise (30 Minutes)

Assign reviewing pairs or groups. Have students peer review one another’s drafts, then make revisions based on the feedback they receive.

Peer Review Questions

- What impression does this poem make on you, as a whole? What feeling are you left with at the end? How does this poem *inspire* you?
- How does the poet shift the way you understand (or think about) climate change? Are there other ways the poet could use language to help you see or understand something in a new way? (Sensory detail? Metaphor or simile? Unfamiliar phrasing?)
- What’s your favorite line? What do you love about it?
- What words of encouragement do you have for this writer as they continue drafting their poem?