



Lesson plan 4 – Level 2 (age 8-11)

If I Hadn't Been A Writer

Gerard Benson

If I hadn't been a writer,
I might have been a vet,
Or then again, I might ha'
Played the drums in a quintet,
Been a plumber in the summer
When the weather's nice and hot,
And a printer in the winter
To be indoors when it's not.

I might have been a dancer
(No not a ballerina
but a tapdance fancy-pants),
I might have been a window-cleaner;
Or I could have been a waiter
Or at least a washer-upper
Or the bloke behind the counter
Who serves you with your cuppa.

A postman, a bricklayer,
Or a boxer or a ref,
Or a pub piano player,
Or a butcher or a chef.
Or a barber or hair-dresser,
A caretaker or teacher
Or even a professor,
Or at a pinch, a preacher.

But I might be something quiet,
A librarian perhaps,
An adviser about diet,
An expert on old maps;
Or something with adventures,
A stuntman (that's exciting!)
And catch bullets in my dentures...
No! I think I'll stick to writing.

First Things First:

Rhythm. Read the poem aloud in pairs. Stand up to read it through again. This time, stamp your foot (or clap your hands together) while speaking out each of the words or syllables that you think sounds like it should be emphasised in each line. Does a pattern emerge?

Try reading aloud one more time. For this one you will be moving around. Imagine you are a ball on a snooker or pool table. As you say the words of the poem, begin by moving in a straight line. However, each time you get to a word or part of a word (syllable) that sounds like it should be emphasised more, turn and make a sharp change in direction - as though the snooker or pool ball has just bounced off the edge cushion and rolled in a different direction. You should find yourself zig-zagging all over the place, so be careful not to bump into each other.

Do you notice anything about the *sounds* of the first verse that also contribute to the rhythmic sound? (Did you spot the number of repeated 't' sounds, at the end of and within words?) What is this poetic device called, when sounds are repeated close to each other? (Alliteration).

What is the effect of this repetition? ('T' is a hard consonant. The repetition of this sound is a bit like the rhythm of a drumstick hitting a drum. It is percussive - beating a rhythm).

Work out the **rhyme scheme**. The way you do this is to put an 'a' next to the first 2 words that rhyme, a 'b' by the next set of rhyming words, then a 'c' by the next pair and so on. You should end up with a rhyme pattern that looks like this for the first verse:

a, b, a, b, c, c, d, e, e, d.

How does the rhyming add to the rhythm of the poem?

Warm Up: Drama Exercises

Either: teacher shouts out the jobs listed in the poem: vet, drummer, plumber printer, tap-dancer... and everyone adopts an instant still life statue representing each occupation.

Or: in pairs, choose 5 occupations mentioned in the poem. Take it in turns to 'sculpt' each other into a still-life statue pose that you think best represents each job. Split the class in half to be statues in a gallery, with the other half being visitors walking around and viewing the sculptures. Swap around.

Dramatic presentation

Divide the class into at least four groups. (If more than four, then put some groups together to work on the same verse). Allocate a verse of the poem to each group. Groups should work on a presentation of their verse, to bring it alive both in terms of vocal and visual presentation. Leading on from the warm-ups, groups can either devise a sequence of linked tableaux or mimes to represent each job. Consider timing of vocal delivery, particularly for the group working on verse four.

Imaginative Development

This is a list poem. It is a list of all the jobs that the poet doesn't do or imagines that he might have done but didn't. The effect of the poem relies on the poet imagining all the other possibilities for employment that he could have engaged in - contrasted with his decision at the end to stick with what he knows.

What was your response to the last two lines of the poem? Why?

Brainstorming

All together, brainstorm a list of as many jobs and occupations as you can think of - both unusual and well-known.

Using rhyme - it's harder work than it looks

Pick out the rhyming words in the poem. Are all the words actual jobs? No. Sometimes instead of using the title of the job to create the rhyme, the poet has described what the worker does instead. So, to find a rhyme with 'washer-upper' – the job of waiter (or café server) is described as

*...the bloke behind the counter
Who serves you with your cuppa.*

Using the brainstormed list of different types of job, first pick out any that actually rhyme. Then see if you too can find other rhymes describing what a worker does.

The aim is to compose a poem called: *Maybe One Day*. The subject is all the kinds of work or jobs you could possibly do in the future. In his poem, Gerard Benson looks *back* over alternative life choices. You are going to look *forward* to the range of choices you *could* make. Why not include some really extraordinary or unlikely careers? A lion tamer...a chocolate biscuit namer? The sky's the limit.

Maybe One Day.
'If I never get to be a ... (highly famous lion tamer)
Perhaps I'll ... (make my fortune as a chocolate biscuit namer)
Or then again...

Use the beginnings above to start your poem.

This is not an easy task. Writing poetry is hard work. It takes crafting and polishing and training, *especially* when it comes to working with rhyme. The result should flow like a river and be transparent: in other words, a rhyme should **ONLY** be used if it makes sense. Test your rhymes. Weigh them on a rhyme-ometer. Is it obvious that you've chosen the word only because it rhymes? Or, does your rhyme not only make perfect sense but also sound great too? Try to avoid rhyming just for the sake of it, like this line from a competition entry about dads:

*He teaches you French
Only when you sit on a bench.*

Does this ring true or make sense? The rhyme-ometer says no!

The work of a writer or a poet is hard. Words are sorted and sifted and polished like gems. The more you practise, the better you get at it. A weight lifter can't just walk in and pick up a colossal weight with no training. Likewise, to develop your skills as a writer you need to exercise your imagination like a muscle and work hard to see what changes you can make to improve.

A different approach

Write a deliberately non-rhyming poem beginning with these lines:

I could be a...
Or maybe...
I'd consider...
Though I'd rather...

Perhaps I'll train to...
Or I'll...

The last line should be the job you actually dream of doing when you are older. (Note: being famous or being a celebrity is not a job!!)

For a really imaginative treatment of the theme of work, try to conjure up completely impossible, imagined occupations such as: running a launderette for clouds (how else do all the grey ones get washed back to fluffy whiteness?); a tap-dance trainer for woodlice; a weaver of blankets for autumn leaves; a composer of new songs for the sea to sing...

Poet Background

There is an interview with Gerard Benson on www.maninthemoon.co.uk/gbinterview.html

Poems on the Underground and Poems around the School

One of Gerard Benson's jobs as a poetry anthologist has been to choose poems to be displayed inside the London Underground train carriages. The huge network of tube trains is filled with slots for adverts. However, sometimes you will find the odd jewel of a poem hidden among all the messages persuading you to buy things. The only purpose of persuasion of each poem is: stop, look, read, think!!

Imagine that your job for the day is to choose a poem for a small, advert sized poster (A4) inside an underground carriage. Find a poem (use the library or internet) and explain why you think it would be a good one for people to read on the tube on their way to or from work.



Acknowledgments

About the authors of these notes

Andrew Fusek Peters and Polly Peters wrote these lesson plans and notes for National Poetry Day. Andrew and Polly are poets, editors and novelists who have written over sixty five titles between them, including the best-selling *Poems With Attitude* (Wayland). 'It is rare and welcome to find a collection that speaks so directly to teenagers' - *The Guardian*.

Andrew also has a 'best of' for younger readers, *Mad, Bad & Dangerously Haddock* (Lion) and two collections for Oxford University Press – *Spies Unlimited* and *Ghosts Unlimited*. Their poems for both younger listeners and teenagers have been recorded for the Poetry Archive. Andrew has worked tirelessly over the last twenty years as a visiting poet in schools, performing his material and trying to show that poetry can be both entertaining and thought-provoking. He also juggles, plays didgeridoo and jaw-harp and has got back into skateboarding in his forties!

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