

A POET'S GUIDE TO TEACHING WORDS THAT BURN



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This is a guide for teachers using the Words That Burn poetry resources with their pupils. Some ideas and activities will work at certain times more than others. All my suggestions are tools I use as a poet and a facilitator.
Deanna Rodger

Words That Burn is Amnesty International's poetry project. It enables young people to explore human rights through the power of words and to create their own work.
amnesty.org.uk/wordsthatburn

Why poetry and human rights?

Poetry is the stuff of humans. It's an articulation of thought and feeling into words to share with others. It's a tricky thing – making sense of what's going on inside.

Human rights are the standards to which we hold one another, and these are not always upheld. Human rights often aren't noticed until they are threatened and by then it can be too late before they are taken away.

How do we put into words a feeling of safety, a feeling of freedom, a feeling of connection? How do we articulate solidarity with people we've never met? How might we give form to 'courage', to 'peace', to 'concern'?

Poetry gives us the tools to be able to do this.

READING POETRY

YOU DON'T NEED TO READ THE WHOLE POEM

Perhaps there is a section you think your pupils would connect to. Use that as an access point. The rest of the poem can be shared later once the group is hooked in.

MAKE THE PUPILS MAKE THE POEM

An activity I use is called 'Remix the poem'. I chop a poem up and ask the pupils, in small groups, to remix it, to make as many poems as they want out of the lines and then to present back to the group. We hear how each group interpreted the same stimuli and then I read the original poem. We either continue writing in response to that poem or move on to another activity.

The pupils are listening more closely to the original poem than if I had just read it. They are more invested in how that poet wrote it which opens up discussions about structure and form.

READ THE SAME POEM SEVERAL TIMES

Ask different pupils to read the poem. I find that it is easier to follow the story of something if it is read in its entirety in one voice and then again in another voice as opposed to line by line. Once it has been heard a couple of times, you can get the poem on its feet by creating performances out of the stanzas. This can help to unlock the story and hidden gems of the poem. It also introduces performance.

HAVE FAITH IN THE POEM

Poetry is trying to communicate something. Not all poems are for all people but there is always a poem out there for you.

ENCOURAGE CURIOSITY

I like to use the words 'perhaps' and 'maybe'. They help me feel I don't have to get it completely right. It's rare that we will meet the poet and all the times I've entered into a discussion with readers of my work, I am always pleasantly surprised and delighted about how it speaks to other people. Often these insights deepen my own understanding of my work.

Point out

STRUCTURE What it looks like on the page. Does it take on a lot of space? Does it have regular stanza lengths?

RHYME SCHEME Is it regular or irregular? Why might that be? What effect does that have?

THE TITLE It is a clue. What is it revealing or hiding?

CONTENT What lines stand out to us and why? How does it make us feel? How does it do that? Is it in the sound of the words or in the content of the poem?

QUESTIONS It's unusual to know straight away what is going on in the poem so ask. Through asking questions we open up to discovering answers.

WRITING POETRY

FIRST, SPLURGE

Really, really encourage an expression free from judgement. I have said that this is the compost heap from which all great things can grow, and we need a lot of compost!

Here are some tasks to help generate writing.

Speed writing. Two minutes to write on different prompts. This might be used for a personification exercise, metaphor exercise or a warm-up. Generates a range of writing quickly. Might suit some pupils more than others.

Free writing. A longer amount of time is given to writing. This can be done with a starting line or a prompt such as 'write everything that is in your mind'. This is good as a general warm up to get pupils to put all work and world thoughts onto a piece of paper to be better able to focus on the session. It can also be used at the end of the session to give pupils a chance to reflect and pour out any questions.

Group poem making. There are many ways of doing this. Try repeating the start of a sentence that the participants complete several times over, such as ‘I come from...’ Or take three to five sheets of big paper, and write a title or starting line on each of them for the group to revolve around and fill with their ideas. It takes the pressure off the individual. Group poems can be devised and shared fostering in celebratory energy.

Responding to other poems. What are they writing about? Is there a line that can be the starting point of a poem? Is there a form that the pupils can copy and write into. I have used James Berry’s poem *People Equal* ([amnesty.org.uk/files/poetry_resource_sheet_5_selection_of_poems.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/poetry_resource_sheet_5_selection_of_poems.pdf)) as it follows a strict form which is fun and accessible. It gets the pupils thinking in opposites which creates space in their writing for nuance and alternate points of view.

Following all this, ask pupils to underline all their favourite lines and ideas (even if not fully formed) and move them on to a fresh page. When they have all of this together ask them to create a tagline for the poem they want it to become. This is an exercise created by poet Simon Mole. He has a brilliant YouTube channel ([youtube.com/simonmole](https://www.youtube.com/simonmole)) on creating poetry. What is serving that tagline? What isn’t? What is missing? This helps to tighten the poem up and make the message in the poem clear.

Encourage pupils to share their poems at this stage. Prompt them to listen out for when they lose interest in saying their own poem, when it feels a bit confusing or not clear. Mark these points and make them stronger.

PERFORMING POETRY

Performance activities also serve as editing tools. Hearing the poem out loud can flag up incoherent sections, tricky rhythms and loss of energy.

MIND

A warm-up, which encourages use of voice and body, trick the performers into performing. The sillier the better! Low stakes circle games such as Zip Zap Boing or Splat. Get the group making lots of noise. Let their minds focus on the ‘winning’ of the game rather than the noise and actions they are doing. You can then refer to the game when performances are a little quiet or reserved.

VOICE

A game called ‘Copy me’ asks the pupils to simply copy what you say and how you say it. Play with sound and volume and tongue twisters to warm up everyone’s voice.

EMOTION

What is the central emotion in the poem? How do you as an individual respond to that emotion? What happens to your voice and your gestures? Being aware of what the emotion does to you means you can become more in control of your performance of the poem.

BODY

Your whole body is a tool in performance. Become aware of your body and how you stand. Are you grounded with two feet on the floor? Do you have a hand in your pocket or are your arms crossed around your body? Make three tableaux: one which captures the beginning of your poem; one which captures the middle; and one which captures the end. How has your body changed through the poem? Can you use that body language in your performance? Decide on the impact that the pupil wants the poem to have on their audience and get them to try on different characters and ways of saying the poem.

Other tools to offer

CASE STUDY

There was a pupil who I noticed was not writing at all in the first session but did participate in the 'Remix the poem' activity. I praised her for this. The next session was an editing and performance session. I was very clear in ensuring the pupils knew that human rights affected them just from being humans. That their lives and experience contained the vitality of human rights existing. I asked the students to write a tagline for the poems they wanted to write either from the writings they had created in the last session or from an idea they had since had.

She began writing. Her poem was about her having to learn English as an additional language and the pressure of that. Of feeling outside of conversations and getting jokes late. I sat and listened and praised and agreed and thanked her. I also made a show of letting the teacher know and asking the student to share her work with her teacher. This was done outside of a group setting to not close her up but was important to connect what she had created with the teacher so that the transformation was held with someone she would continue to be in contact with and be encouraged by.

CASE STUDY

Sometimes it's the skill of writing that gets in the way of creativity. One pupil was engaged but frozen in the writing of her ideas. I simply asked her some questions about the tagline she had decided and wrote down what she said exactly as she said it. All 'erms' and 'likes' and 'you knows'. I read this out to her. 'There, your ideas! Well done! Write exactly as you think, don't try to make it sound like "poetry"'.

Now what astounded me was that this pupil took it upon herself to do the same thing with her friends. She prompted them with questions and wrote down exactly what they said. The tools we offer, especially with regard to believing in the pupils' ideas, are transformative. This pupil had felt a shift in the value of her thoughts and couldn't help but to share that with her peers.

Poems

The Words That Burn sessions use the following poems to explore areas such as gender, identity, equality and freedom of expression, and set off discussions and writing.

BEING HEARD

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-1-being-heard](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-1-being-heard)

[Encounter with freedom by Elsa Wiesel](#)

[Gingerbread man by Joseph Coelho](#)

[Sally size zero by Grace Nichols](#)

[Russian doll by Rachel Rooney](#)

[First they came by Martin Niemoller](#)

[My lover is a woman by Pat Parker](#)

[Cutbacks by Sarah Crossan](#)

[Song of myself by Walt Whitman](#)

[Apologia by Oscar Wilde](#)

BEING ME

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-2-being-me](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-2-being-me)

[I come from by Dean Atta](#)

[Song of myself by Walt Whitman](#)

FREEDOM

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-3-freedom](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-3-freedom)

[The little boy with his hands up by Yala Korwin](#)

[First they came by Martin Niemoller](#)

CHANGE

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-4-change](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-4-change)

[Leaving home by Michael Rosen](#)

[I dream a world by Langston Hughes](#)

WITNESS

www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-5-witness

[Head over heels by Emtithal Mahmoud](#)

[You have a big imagination or 400,000 ways to cry by Emtithal Mahmoud](#)

[The blood by Anthony Anaxagorou](#)

DIGNITY

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-6-dignity](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-6-dignity)

[Take up space by Vanessa Kisuule](#)

[A gay poem by Keith Jarrett](#)

[Foreign by Hollie McNish](#)

[Being British by Deanna Rodger](#)

[Bedecked by Victoria Redel](#)

[Back in the playground blues by Adrian Mitchell](#)

[This is not a humanizing poem by Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan](#)

[Poems with disabilities by Jim Ferris](#)

[Glasgow Snow by Jackie Kay](#)

[Dwellings by Sarah Crossan](#)

[I am a man by Jay Hulme](#)

SPEAK UP

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-7-speak](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-7-speak)

[Serve and protect by Anthony Anaxagorou](#)

[Dear Hearing World by Raymond Antrobus](#)

POWER

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-8-power](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-8-power)

[Freedom by Inja](#)

[Do not go gentle into that good night by Dylan Thomas](#)

[Black/White by Amyra León](#)

[Darling by Amyra León](#)

RESPECT

[amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-9-respect](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/session-9-respect)

[Half-caste by John Agard](#)

[The right word by Imtiaz Dharker](#)