Excavating the Soul:
The Milwaukee Public Museum Student Poetry Competition

Richard Hedderman, Milwaukee Public Museum

Elizabeth Jorgensen, Arrowhead Union High School

Abstract: Hedderman discusses his approach to evaluating the poems as they're submitted to the student poetry competition, while Jorgensen provides a classroom perspective.

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Jorgensen. Looking for a way to energize my classroom with authentic writing opportunities, I scour websites, newspapers, and online announcements for student-friendly writers' markets. Although I could formulate a hypothetical audience for my classroom writing assignments, I find that student motivation increases with authentic opportunities. Having students submit to writers' markets isn't any more work than an assignment that stays in the classroom, and writers' markets facilitate my pedagogical goals.

One Wisconsin-wide writers' market is the Milwaukee Public Museum's annual poetry competition. Now in its tenth year, the competition is open to Wisconsin students in grades 3-12. The competition fits naturally inside Wisconsin English or social studies curricula as students are challenged to compose a poem in 30 lines or fewer as a response to the Museum's permanent or temporary exhibits, collections, or fields of research.

Hedderman. Though poems are commonly submitted by English and language arts teachers, this is not a requirement, and student work may be submitted by teachers of any subject.

The Museum launched the program with its first competition in 2008. Early the previous year, Museum staff were in the planning stages for a traveling exhibition on the *Titanic* and brainstorming ideas for innovative programming to support it, when a staff member suggested a poetry competition for students. So, that first year, the theme was "The *Titanic*, Ships and Shipwrecks," and hundreds of student poems poured in from schools around the state. The winners were invited to read their poems at the museum on May 18, which is International Museum Day, and a poster featuring their winning poems was displayed in the exhibition for the remainder of its run. The program was a success, and the Museum's Education Department adopted it as a permanent feature of its regular education programming, engaging students in the exploration of the Museum and its exhibits and collections through the application of creative language arts.

Subsequent themes continue to align closely with the Museum's exhibits and collections. The year following the *Titanic* competition, the theme was "Excavating the Soul—the Poetry of Archaeology," which connected with the Museum's first hosting of the Milwaukee chapter of the Archaeological Institute of America's archaeology fair. The next year, the traveling exhibition *Mummies of the World*, inspired a number of wonderful student poems. The theme "Objects and Artifacts—the Poetry of the Museum's Collections," spanned both the 2012 and 2013 competitions owing to the richness of the Museum's collections. Students were encouraged to choose a favorite or interesting object on exhibit during a visit to the museum, or select one from a virtual collection of the Museum's artifacts and specimens available online. Subsequent themes included "journeys," "animals," "ancient worlds," and "food."

Jorgensen. The competition's theme may change each year, but the students' poems should always display creativity and originality, and reflect the authenticity and history of their topic.

In 2018, the Museum will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the competition with the theme "10 at MPM," which focuses on "ten iconic exhibits that highlight the Museum, its collections, and mission, and celebrate its legacy as one of the region's most treasured

cultural institutions." The ten exhibits are the Hebior Mammoth, Humpback Whale Skeleton, Streets of Old Milwaukee, Butterfly Vivarium, Hell Creek, Native American Pow Wow, Crow Indian Bison Hunt, Masai Lion Hunt, Crossroads of Civilization, and Japanese House and Garden.

The submission deadline for next year's competition is April 27, 2018, and teachers may submit one poem from each student by surface mail or submit electronically from a link on the poetry competition webpage. Although students could visit the museum, online resources allow them to research and create original poems without leaving the classroom.

In her article "Getting Real: Authenticity in Writing Prompts," Slagle (1997) wrote that "authentic writing implies that the student is writing in his or her voice to a real living person or group about a matter of concern." Furthermore, In "Real-World Writing: Making Purpose and Audience Matter," Wiggins (2009) wrote that teachers should "ensure that students have to write for real audiences and purposes, not just the teacher in response to generic prompts ... Real writers are trying to make a difference, find their true audience, and cause some result in that readership" (p. 30). Whereas many teachers rely on a theoretical audience, the MPM's poetry competition provides students with authenticity across grade levels.

Not only does the Museum assignment motivate students to write for an audience and analyze other poems for structure and meaning, but the competition also aligns with the Wisconsin State and Common Core standards. Specifically, the standard on Production and Distribution of Writing states that students should "produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience ... develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach ... [and] use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others." Additional standards—including Conventions of Standard, Knowledge of Language and Vocabulary Acquisition and Use—are also met throughout the writing and

editing process. As Wiggins wrote, "the point is to open the mind or heart of a real audience—cause a fuss, achieve a feeling, start some thinking" (p. 30).

I remind my students of this when we discuss the judging criteria. Void of a rubric, their poems are "judged on creativity, originality, imagery, artistic quality, and sense of poetic expression." But what do these terms mean? To begin, I have students read the contest guidelines and create their own definitions of the judging criteria. They connect "imagery" to showing instead of telling. They define "artistic quality" as "how a poem is like art." They agree that effective art evokes an emotion and makes the viewer (or in this case, reader) think or feel differently. Creativity, they decide, makes one submission stand out from the others, and they surmise that of the hundreds of statewide submissions, theirs will need to not only address the theme, but also be original. Throughout the discussion, I jot down notes for them to access later. This discussion helps them form an imaginary guideline of their own.

To further guide the writing process, students read and analyze previous winning poems, such as this 2013 winner, noting commonalities and how the poems fit the judging criteria:

> "Porcelain Deathbed: Dresden Tete-a-Tete Tea Set" by Brenda Suhan
> Grade 12, Arrowhead Union High School, Hartland
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> Porcelain, the chilly
> white of fresh Dresden snow
> sits on the windowsill.
> Kaleidoscope of rich
> maroon and gold dances
> in the winter sunshine.
> ***

The one gift she asked for.
He saved all his money
to grant a final wish:
Her childhood fantasy,
one luxury glowing
in the winter sunshine.

Fragility of life
released in wispy breaths
of steam soon extinguished.
Warmth of blood grows colder
than snowy porcelain
in the winter sunshine.

Just one more final sip,
smiling, content and free.
He smiles back, an echo
of their love forever,
cherished in this moment
in the winter sunshine.

I ask the students what they notice. "There is a story," one student says. We discuss how Suhan drew inspiration from a museum artifact (Dresden Tete-a-Tete Tea Set) and used her own creativity and voice to tell an original story that fits with the authenticity of the artifact. One student highlights the characters, themes, and conclusion. Another notices "interesting language choices." I push for specifics, and the students say they notice the rule of thirds in the line "smiling, content and free," and action verbs—"dances," "sits," "grows," "released," "extinguished," "asked," "saved," "cherished." Earlier in the semester, students learned about stylistic devices and literary terms. This discussion carries throughout the MPM poetry competition. No matter the writing assignment, they learn to identify stylistic devices and purposeful writing choices in exemplars and

utilize them in their own work. "Her structure is strong," another says. Students note six lines in each stanza, each line contains six syllables, and a repeating sixth line. While they comment on the use of enjambment and emotion, I continue adding notes to our brainstormed list.

Students then read a winning poem from 2008 (the first year of the Milwaukee Public Museum's poetry competition when the theme was "The *Titanic*, Ships and Shipwrecks"):

"Waltzing with the Ice Queen" by Karly McMillan
Grade 12, Arrowhead Union High School, Hartland

One-two-three
One...
Two...
Three...
Telegraph fingers tip-toe in time with the
One-two-three
One...
Two...
Three...
One-two-three
Ice water spreads over the dancers' toes.
On deck, a spotlight follows the
One-two-three
One...
Two...
Three...
One-two-three
A distant audience hears The Odd Waltz—sees the dancers
First row turns up its nose
Second and third rows inch closer, intrigued by the

One-two-three

One...

Two...

Three...

One-two-three

Fingers are freezing on bowstrings

On keys

Dancers, desperate, the tempo picks up,

But the rhythm remains

One-two-three

One...

Two...

Three...

One-two-three

Morning headlines read like telegrams:

Titanic Hit Iceberg STOP

Thousand Dead STOP

We're sinking

STOP!

Epilogue:

A fish,

The heir,

In a tiny room

On the ocean floor

Swishes its tail with a

One-two-three

One...

Two...

Three...

One-two-three

I ask similar questions: "What do you notice?" and "Why do you think this poem was chosen as a winner?" Students analyze the story, the structure (how lines build between a repeating phrase), the use of varied and purposeful punctuation (ellipsis, hyphen, colon, dash) and illusion. They discuss how the "One-two-three/One…/Two…/Three…/One-two-three" represents the tapping of SOS, the count in the waltz, and the fish swishing its tail around the sunken *Titanic*. "This is the rule of thirds again," a student comments.

Hedderman. Truly, the first thing I look at when evaluating a poem submitted to the competition is how it is framed, formatted and presented. So, there's a responsibility incumbent on the teacher to be very attentive to the submission guidelines. I need to see the student's name, the teacher's name, grade level taught, and full contact information in the top right corner of the page. If I don't see that, my confidence in the poem plummets before I've even read it. And colored paper, illustrations and decorative fonts are just distracting, and never do anything to make the poem more appealing or more likely to win. And if the poem is longer than 30 lines, you've lost me before I even read it, which I may not do. This might all seem a little fussy and bureaucratic, but it's critical; it tells me how much care has been put into the submission. If the teachers and students don't care intensely about the work, then neither will I.

Once I'm into the poem, I want to see structure, a sense from the poem that it has been *crafted*, that it bears the consciousness of the writer who has invested it with meaning and focus. Interesting or fun words on the page won't make a poem; structure does. So, I'm looking for evidence that the writer has thought hard about how the words should go together to give the poem weight and power. It's common for some to think that creativity equals sloppiness, which is a very poor argument. Creativity may be the impulse behind the poem—and that impulse can, and probably should be, sloppy, messy and disorganized. But structure reflects craft, and craft gives the poem meaning and impact. That's what makes it art.

I also want to see the poem *end*. I don't like poems that just stop. I need to see a thoughtful, moving, well-crafted ending. Otherwise, I get the impression that the writer

just walked away from his poem instead of putting in the work necessary to make it a cohesive and integrated work of art. In his *Letters on Poetry* to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats (1940) said that a good poem "comes right with a click like a closing box" (p. 24). I want to hear that click at the end of the poem.

I also look for closely observed detail which reflects a truly invested engagement with the subject by the student writer. And I look for *surprise*. I like a poem that tells me something I don't already know--not in the sense of a fact, exactly, but an emotion, observation, comparison, perspective. I've seen plenty of student poems composed of a list of facts about the subject. This won't disqualify a poem, but the list of facts needs something unusual, something innovative--a twist--something the poet is telling me about the relationship with the subject that I can't find by just Googling "the Titanic" or "mummies," for example. I'll also give a poem a lot of credit for a bit of humor. Poetry doesn't have to be serious all the time, and certainly doesn't need to be serious to be good. I really appreciate a laugh in a poem. "Crummy Mummy" is a great example of a funny, successful poem.

> "Crummy Mummy" by Max Welvang
> Grade 6, Heyer Elementary School, Waukesha
> Oh dear, sure is dark in here
> It seems like I've been in here a year
> Bones feel dry
> Hey where's my eye
> It's no fun
> That I can't
> I'm stuck in this crate
> Without a mate
> How's that for fate
> The afterlife I've gotta travel
> But I'm stuck beneath this gravel
> If this pyramid should collapse
> They'd only find my linen wraps

If I get to the afterlife

Maybe I'd find my pretty wife

I've got this wound in my side

Must've happened after I died

I've looked everywhere

Found my heart—it's still there

I used to rule a lot of land

Now I can't even find my hand

Lyin' by the river Nile

I got style

And I look for something transformative about the poem in what it's telling me about its subject. Is it a pyramid, or a monument to the pharaoh's soul that declares his indelible mark on eternity by repeatedly casting a shadow across millennia, as in this poem?

"The Pyramid" by Emma Cayen
Grade 4, Golda Meir School, Milwaukee

A red sand stone pyramid,

white sand blowing about.

The sun ablaze, making the tip of the pyramid

Gleam a blinding white.

The sky an earthly turquoise.

One small cavern of sand.

Crumbling rock looking like a pyramid itself.

One missing its gleaming tip,

stolen.

For the millionth time, they cast their shadows.

Is it a bunch of lines carved into the ground somewhere in Chile, or is it a monkey swinging from vines through the jungle, as in this poem?

"The Nazca Monkey" by Riley Houlihan
Grade 4, Golda Meir School, Milwaukee

Starting with the spiraling tail
        Like an everlasting whirlpool

Drawing down to the snake-looking
        Legs, grasping frogs,
                Clinging to a vine

Back to the skinny banana-shaped body
        Releasing the arms
                        Like round-abouts
        With the flicking of tips of
A lion's tail at the very end

Last the head
Drinking a coconut,
        The stubby nose like straw

Escaping the jaguar,
    Up the vine over the endless
Jungle, moving like a dart up the vine
                Into the air

Envying a bird
But still thinking it's good
        Enough to be a monkey
                In the air

Is it that dead pharaoh, or just an average guy who wakes up in a state of utter confusion in a pitch black tomb who can't find his eye, his hand or his wife ("Crummy Mummy")? Is it a pre-Columbian golden effigy, or a jaguar prowling the rain forest, submerged in the shadows and leafy depths, as in this poem?

"Golden Jaguar" by Braden Bilcharz
Grade 7, Karcher Middle School, Burlington

Slick shape of Jaguar.
The gold shines bright like the sun.
Tail as long as vines.

Shape of the Jaguar.
The gold shining in the light.
Legs for fast running.

Ears for listening.
Eyes for spotting and hunting.
Claws for grabbing prey.

Legs and feet for speed.
Gold spots on body like a jaguar.
Gold shining in the sun.

Each of these is a winning poem. Note the attention to detail, the strong sense of voice and investment from the writer. Each features a vivid, transformative power that involves the reader in the poet's discovery of new terrain.

I want the poem to open my eyes, not only about its subject, but also about the writer. This is *not* easy to do, but when a student writer accomplishes it in a poem, that poem goes immediately to the top of my "potential" pile, as opposed to the top of the "nope" pile. And I like to see poems that stay linked to their theme--and to the writer's voice,

emotion and impulse--all the way through, something else that's tough to do. For me, the poem has to hang together and stay together. A poem needs a spine--a through-line, an adherence to theme--that its various parts attach to so that it stays together as a coherent, artistic unit. Again, this is not easy, not for professional poets, let alone students who are maybe trying to write a poem for the first time. But it *is* possible, and at least six students do it every year.

Jorgensen. After we collaboratively analyze previous winning poems, I provide students with independent work time to immerse themselves in the MPM Poetry Competition's website to look at additional poems for themes, inspiration and ideas. Although exemplars provide ideas, I caution them about mimicking a previous winning poem: "Your poem should be uniquely yours." I remind students that poems will be judged on originality. The goal of the discussion is to remind them of their writing toolbox and inspire creativity.

Once they understand the purpose and background of this assignment, they decide on a topic that coincides with that year's theme and something that interests, inspires or intrigues them. I reference an excerpt from Lamott's (1995) *Bird By Bird* that we read earlier in the semester: "I go back to trying to breathe, slowly and calmly, and I finally notice the one-inch picture frame that I put on my desk to remind me of short assignments. It reminds me that all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame. This is all I have to bite off for the time being" (p. 17).

"Don't do too much. Don't take on everything all at once. Start small," I say.

After choosing a topic, students share ideas and brainstorm. "Just brainstorm and freewrite about your topic. What does your topic smell, sound, taste like? What connections can you make between your topic and your own life? What stories could you tell? What do you want the purpose of your poem to be?" Students discuss their theme using sensory details and stylistic devices.

Then, we make a list on the board of how to incorporate a structure: number of lines in each stanza, a repeated line or phrase, number of syllables in each line (or pattern of syllables), shape, headings or subtitles, theme, punctuation, pattern, rhyme, repetition. Students also share what structures were used in previous winning poems. They write first and second drafts of poems, peer edit, receive feedback from me, and continue to polish and perfect. Additionally, they take turns sharing drafts with the class and in small groups. They enjoy creating their own story and structure. They also appreciate the opportunity to write for an authentic audience and writers' market. As the CCSS says, students "appreciate nuances, such as how the composition of an audience should affect tone when speaking and how the connotations of words affect meaning."

Joey Hassler, a junior in my Creative Writing class, said, "I enjoyed submitting my work ... I definitely didn't think I had a chance at winning the competition, but writing is an art, and you never know when something you write might strike someone."

Another student, Andrea Beaudry, a junior, said, "Regardless of winning or not, each piece tells its very own story. I think that [students] should not feel pressured or think about the prize, but let the words flow. When you peacefully write something it ends up being a lot better then if you were stressed out trying to make it the best."

During the 2016-2017 competition, three of my students were selected as winners: juniors Andrea Beaudry for "Summer Time Snack" and Joey Hassler for "The Story Behind Food (11x26)," and senior Kenny Walloch for "Building the Perfect Calzone," all posted on the MPM Winning Poems website. Andrea said, "I didn't think much of it at the time and I didn't even think I had a chance to win." But when her poem was selected, she said she was "pretty happy ... kind of laughing with surprise, because I didn't think my poem was very good. But writing is a coping skill for me, so it was good being reminded of that. And it got me writing for my personal sake a lot more again." Kenny said, "I wasn't sure if the email was sent to the correct person and I was surprised when my name was on the winner roster and wanted to tell my family, but it was late and they were all asleep. I found out that it was probably my engineering instincts that

made the poem beautifully structured." Ken said teachers should "give the students as much creative freedom as possible."

Winning students join Hedderman for a poetry reading and workshop held at the Museum on a Saturday in May. The workshop lasts about 45 minutes, and the students are given an opportunity to read their poems and answer questions. Hedderman gives them feedback on what they accomplished and why their poems won, while the other students discuss what they liked in each other's work. After a short break, family and friends join the students for the reading. Hedderman introduces each poem with his commentary. A PowerPoint accompanies the reading, and features images that support the subject of each poem as the student reads it. Each student winner is awarded a complimentary one-year family membership to the Museum.

Joey said, "I thought it was fun to submit my work, and the award ceremony was fun to go to. It doesn't take long to submit, and winning can bring tons of fun experiences … Another parent, a stranger to me, actually talked to me about my piece after the reading and that was really cool to me. I thought it was cool to listen to what Richard thought was best about our poems. He pointed out things in other people's poems that I didn't notice at first … It was just a really fun experience."

Andrea said, "I got so nervous to read it in front of everyone, but at the end of it, I realized it wasn't half bad and I felt accomplished." She says this to teachers who are considering having students submit: "It's definitely worth it. Teachers should encourage their students to just have fun with it."

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