

“I” poems: Invitations for students to deepen literary understanding

Using literary models, teachers can invite and support students in composing first-person poetry about specific people, places, and perspectives. In the process, students can deepen their understanding of characters, setting, plot conflict, and narrative point of view.

So many of the novels that elementary students read are written as first-person narratives, from *Joey Pigza Loses Control* (Gantos, 2000) and *Ida B* (Hannigan, 2004) to *Shiloh* (Naylor, 1991) and *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000). In books like these, the narrator’s voice is strong and clear, direct and intimate. Students relate well to such voices. Inviting students to write in the first person is a way to allow them to express their own voices. It can also be a way for them to deepen their literary experiences of characters, setting, plot, and narrative point of view.

This article provides a description of a very specific invitation to write in the first person: the “I” poem. The narrator of an “I” poem can be a person, place, or object that speaks directly to readers. For example, Diane Siebert’s book *Cave* (2000) is an extended “I” poem that begins with these lines:

I am the cave,
So cool and dark,
Where time, unending, leaves its mark
As natural forces build and hone
A crystal world from weeping stone.

There are no set formats for “I” poems. They can rhyme, but rhyme is not a necessary or critical fea-

ture. The salient characteristic of an “I” poem is the first-person point of view. In writing such a poem, students become the narrator, expressing thoughts and feelings from the narrator’s point of view.

This article presents examples of how teachers can engage students in writing “I” poems to enhance their literary understanding and appreciation of two novels that are often used in the elementary school, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985) and *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997), and the picture book *When Marian Sang* (Ryan, 2002), which lends itself well to reading aloud. These examples can serve as models for teachers to use with other books.

Reading and writing

Writing in response to reading can deepen and extend the dialogue between a reader and a text (Harwayne, 2001; Lattimer, 2003; McGee & Richgels, 1990; Tierney, 1990). Invitations to write about the people and places encountered in stories are invitations to continue thinking about and imagining them. As students revisit a text, they begin to think about it in deeper ways and to notice what they overlooked at first glance. Thus, composing becomes a context that elicits and supports students in comprehending.

Both cognitive and aesthetic theories support the notion that writing can be a means for enhancing understanding from reading. From a cognitive perspective, both reading and writing are viewed as constructive processes that require active engagement on the part of readers and writers. This engagement involves efforts to understand and be understood, to call upon knowledge of authors and how they work, and to know what to expect as part of an audience.

During reading, students construct tentative understandings. During writing, they can consolidate and enhance those understandings, resulting in a “fuller possession of whatever the text may hold” (Marshall, 1987, p. 31). For Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), writing can be characterized as a knowledge transforming process, a process in which writers’ “thoughts come into existence through the composing process itself” (p. 10). Indeed, Van Nostrand (1979) suggested that the process of writing compels readers to join “bits of information into relationships, many of which have never existed until the composer utters them” (p. 178). McGinley and Tierney (1989) proposed that such revelations are similar to the discoveries made by travelers who crisscross a landscape, coming to know it better each time they traverse it. Writing about what one has read is an opportunity to see the landscape of the text again, potentially in deeper and different ways.

From an aesthetic perspective, Cariello (1990) drew our attention to Dewey (1934) and his notion that learning or understanding depends upon opportunities to engage in self-reflective closure. For Cariello, “The writing of poetry, or any other ‘creative writing’ is a way to do this” (p. 832).

Pearson and Fielding (1991) noted that “students understand and remember ideas better when they have to transform those ideas from one form to another” (p. 847). In the process of composing an “I” poem, students engage in such transformative activity. Inviting students to write from a perspective other than their own supports their imaginative entry into other ways of looking at and thinking about situations and events (Levstik & Barton, 1997; Tompkins & McGee, 1993).

In the sections that follow, I describe two instructional sequences for writing “I” poems as ways to deepen students’ understanding of setting, character, plot, and narrative point of view. Each sequence begins with a short description of the novel that students are reading and an analysis of how an understanding of the novel can be supported or enhanced by writing “I” poems. Next, an “I” poem example is provided that students can use as a model for their own poems. Finally, the poems that students created are presented.

In the first part of this article, the students referred to are preservice teachers in a reading comprehension course that I taught. I engaged my

students (future teachers) in doing the work that I hoped they would invite their future students to do: a notion supported by Wilson and Ball’s (1996) suggestion that teacher educators “teach prospective teachers as they would have them teach” (p. 132). By writing “I” poems themselves, the preservice teachers experienced the kind of learning that their students could experience. Thus, the instructional sequences for building background before reading and responding to literature after reading presented in this article are really exemplars of instructional sequences for elementary students. As such, the teachers who read this article can use them as models for their students.

In the final part of this article, the students referred to are fourth graders who composed “I” poems in response to *When Marian Sang* (Ryan, 2002), a picture book biography of Marian Anderson that was read aloud to them. The names of these students as well as the names of the preservice teachers are pseudonyms.

Before reading

Sarah, Plain and Tall (MacLachlan, 1985) is a novel in which the setting is of particular importance. Sarah’s decision to marry Jacob Witting and be a mother to Anna and Caleb is a decision to leave one place—the coast of Maine—and embrace another very different place—the Kansas prairie. Throughout the book, MacLachlan provides rich details about both places. Sarah remembers the cliffs and the sea of Maine’s coast, but she also discovers the beauty of the landlocked prairie. MacLachlan defines both of these places by specific references to flowers and trees (23 varieties) and animals (20 kinds), as well as physical features such as windbreaks and dunes, ponds, and beaches (see Table 1).

To build a background for reading and responding to *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985), I discussed with students novels in which the setting plays an important role; for example, *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) and *Julie of the Wolves* (George, 1972). I explained that setting also plays an important role in *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, the novel we would be reading. I asked students to select a plant and an animal from the list in Table 1, and then do research to find out about it. The research

TABLE 1
Details of setting in *Sarah, Plain and Tall*
(MacLachlan, 1985)

	Kansas prairie	Maine coast	
Plants	Indian paintbrush	Rose	
	Blue-eyed grass	Goldenrod	
	Blue flax	Wild aster	
	Clover	Woolly ragwort	
	Prairie violet	Pine	
	Bride's bonnet	Spruce	
	Rose	Dahlia	
	Dandelion	Columbine	
	Wild daisy	Nasturtium	
	Zinnia		
	Marigold		
	Wild feverfew		
	Tumbleweed		
	Tansy		
	Animals	Gopher	Flounder
		Woodchuck	Sea bass
	Sheep	Bluefish	
	Cow	Whale	
	Marsh hawk	Sea gull	
	Meadowlark	Sea clam	
	Killdeer	Oyster	
	Crow	Razor clam	
	Turkey buzzard	Conch	
		Moonsnail	
		Seal	
Physical features	Fields	Sea	
	Windbreak	Rock cliffs	
	Pond	Beaches	
		Dunes	

provided students with interesting details about plants and animals to share. For example, cows spend up to six hours eating and eight hours chewing their cud each day. Each tumbleweed produces up to 250,000 seeds. They tumble so they can spread them. Oysters can become sick if they are moved about too much.

I also asked students to examine several books by Diane Siebert (*Mojave*, 1988; *Heartland*, 1989; *Sierra*, 1991; *Cave*, 2000; *Mississippi*, 2001) because her books are models of precise observation of setting, reflecting careful research and thoughtful word choice. The following excerpt from *Mojave* is an example:

I am the desert.
 I am free.
 Come walk the sweeping face of me....

I feel the tread of tiny feet
 As lizards dart in swift retreat
 To hide in shadows, safe, unseen,
 Beneath the yucca's spears of green.
 Here Joshua trees, in mighty stands,
 Spread twisted arms and sharp, green hands
 Above the tortoises who sleep
 Within the shade, then slowly creep
 Across my rocks, in armored domes....

Students noticed the specificity of Siebert's references to plants and animals: yucca, Joshua tree, lizard, and tortoise, as well as her use of precise and interesting words such as *tread*, *dart*, *swift*, and *armored*. We discussed her use of rhyme and how it creates momentum and rhythm. We agreed, however, that making the desert itself the narrator was her boldest and most masterful choice.

Students were then invited to compose their own "I" poems. They could choose to write about the Kansas prairie or the coast of Maine. They were free to use rhyme, as Siebert did, but they could choose not to. As students wrote, they were encouraged to make use of the information shared by their peers about specific plants and animals in each environment.

The result of students' research and their study of Siebert's models was a remarkable array of poems. Some writers modeled their poems very closely on Siebert's, using rhyme and even echoing her opening lines. Nancy's poem is an example.

I am the Kansas Prairie
 Open and free
 Land running as far as one can see

Another student chose to create a shape poem.

I am the sea . . .
 the sea whose waves crash along the rocky coast of Maine.
 I am the sea . . .
 the sea that is the home of flounder, seal, and beluga whales.

No matter what form the poems took, they all included specific details about the prairie or coastal landscape and its plants and animals. For example, Lily wrote,

I am the Kansas prairie.
I am rolling and lonely to see
But there is more to me than you think.
Gophers hide under me
Afraid of getting too much sun.
I have no trees to shade me
Only prickly tumbleweed blows through me.
I see killdeer proudly flaunt their tails
And I watch dandelions fight for sun
with the covering clover.
I hear the cows chewing on top of me
Taking almost all day to finish their lunch....

Another student wrote about the Maine coast:

I harbor razor clams with spiky spines
And oysters, fragile and moody and ill at ease
if my currents move them like a breeze.

As students read their poems in class, listeners discovered the features of two very different environments. When students began to read *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985), they were well aware of Sarah's sense of dislocation as she looked out on the Kansas prairie.

After reading

Composing "I" poems before reading can support students in building background and activating relevant knowledge and experience. Crafting "I" poems can also be a way for students to respond to their reading. In the following section, I describe three kinds of "I" poems that were written in response to the novel *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997). One kind of "I" poem is represented by the free-verse poems in *Out of the Dust* itself; another one is an example of an "I" poem that is associated with plot events. A third "I" poem provides a very specific format that students can use to structure their poems.

Out of the Dust (Hesse, 1997) is historical fiction set in the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma. The entire novel is a series of free-verse poems written by Billie Jo, the narrator, and all of the poems are "I" poems. In the first poem, Billie Jo recalls what she has heard about the day of her birth.

"Beginning: August 1920"

As summer wheat came ripe,
so did I,
born at home, on the kitchen floor.
...
I came too fast for the doctor,
bawling as soon as Daddy wiped his hand around
inside my mouth.
To hear Ma tell it,
I hollered myself red the day I was born.
Red's the color I've stayed ever since.
Daddy named me Billie Jo.
He wanted a boy.
Instead,
he got a long-legged girl
with a wide mouth
and cheekbones like bicycle handles.
He got a redheaded, freckle-faced, narrow-hipped girl
with a fondness for apples
and a hunger for playing fierce piano. (Hesse, 1997, p. 3)

Hesse's poem reveals a great deal about Billie Jo: where she lives, what she looks like, what she likes to do, even what she likes to eat. In other poems, Billie Jo writes about her father, a farmer, and her mother, who loved to play the piano just as she does. Billie Jo also tells about the terrible accident that changes her family forever. Her father had put a bucket of kerosene next to the stove. Her pregnant mother, thinking it was water, lifted it over the hot stove to make coffee. Instead, she makes a "rope of fire" (p. 61). When Billie Jo hears her mother run outside screaming, she runs for the bucket and throws its contents out the door and onto her mother who had come back to the porch. "I didn't know./I didn't know Ma was coming back./The flaming oil/splashed/onto her apron,/and Ma/suddenly Ma,/was a column of fire." (p. 61). Before her mother dies, she gives birth to a son who lives for only a short time. Billie Jo's hands are badly burned, and she is unable to play the piano. As her hands heal, Billie Jo must learn to forgive herself and her father.

Out of the Dust (Hesse, 1997) includes memorable models for students to use in composing their own poems in response to their reading of the novel. In the following poem, one of my students, Sara,

used Hesse's poem about Billie Jo's birth as a model for a poem about her own birth.

"A Girl Named Sara"

As the strong March winds
began to give way
to the showers of April,
I was born to a beautiful, loving mother.
Father waiting patiently
to embrace his long, lanky, brown baby.
Unstoppable from the start, I must have
driven them wild with ceaseless
movement,
running
jumping
twirling
long brown hair flying wildly
until I fell exhausted.
But only for a moment...
And then gone again!

The beginning of Sara's poem ("As the strong March winds/began to give way") closely mirrors the beginning of Hesse's poem ("As summer wheat came ripe"), and there are echoes of Hesse's technique of piling on adjectives ("redheaded, freckle-faced, narrow-hipped") in Sara's ("long, lanky, brown"). As she imagines and describes her own beginning, Sara demonstrates that she has paid attention to what Hesse has written, placing her own experience—real or imagined—next to Billie Jo's.

I also offered students another model for an "I" poem, one that focused on events in the plot of a novel and was written by fifth grader Alycyn Pratt (1999). Pratt wrote an "I" poem in response to her reading of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960) by taking on the perspective of Karana, the main character.

"I am Karana, I am not alone"

I am Karana of Galasat.
I am the daughter of Chief Chowig.
I am brave like him.
He is killed by the Aleuts.
He left me, but I am not alone.
I have the village of Galasat.
I am proud to be one of them.

I am afraid as we leave our land.

I see Ramo from the ship.

I swim back to be with him.

They left us, but

I am not alone....

I read the verses of the poem, but asked students to read the last lines chorally. This kind of reading reinforced the power of the refrain. After the reading, we talked about how the poem moves through *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960), each verse focusing on a specific event in the plot involving Karana being with or finding someone and then losing that person. This kind of "I" poem appealed to my student Lorraine, who wrote the following poem about *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997):

"A Child Without a Mother"

I am grieving the loss of my mother.

I wonder why dad put the kerosene by the stove.

I hear the blame that is put on me.

I want my father's part in the accident realized.

I am a child without a mother.

I pretend what she would say to me if she were here.

I touch the keys of her piano.

I worry if I will ever be able to play again.

I am a child without a mother....

Lorraine's decision to use the refrain "I am a child without a mother" emphasizes the sad burden that Billie Jo must bear.

Another "I" poem that I introduced to my students is the "I am" poem developed by Levstik and Barton (1997, p. 130). Levstik and Barton explained that, for some students, the "slots" provide a structure that supports their thinking and imagining.

The following is the format for an "I am" poem:

I am _____

I wonder _____

I hear _____

I see _____

I want _____

I am _____

I pretend _____

I feel _____
I touch _____
I worry _____
I cry _____
I am _____

I understand _____
I say _____
I dream _____

Several of my students chose to use the “I am” format. The two examples that follow, by Amanda and Terri, are written from interesting narrative points of view: in Amanda’s poem, the once loved piano speaks; in Terri’s poem, it is one of the apple trees that Billie Jo’s mother had planted. Both poems reveal the writers’ understanding of character and plot. The poems also reveal how imitation can also accommodate innovation.

“The Piano”

I am the once loved piano.
I wonder if I will ever be heard again.
I hear echoes of music from when
I was once played.
I see pain in the eyes of the little girl
 who wants to play me.
I want to be played again.
I am the once loved piano.

“Her Hope”

I am her hope.
I wonder how long I can last.
I hear her sing as she nourishes me.
I see her true delight in my growth.
I am *her* tree of life.
I pretend that the dust doesn’t bother me.
I feel the sharp stings of the wind.
I touch her hair as she passes.
I worry that the wind will break me.
I cry out to the heavens for rain.
I am just wasting my energy.
I understand how she needs me.
I say I am strong.
I dream we can both hold on.

As students shared their poems, we followed their pathways through *Out of the Dust* (Hesse,

1997), crisscrossing the landscape of the novel in ways we had not discovered for ourselves.

Writing “I” poems in response to a read-aloud

The preservice teachers were enthusiastic about their “I” poem experiences, and many brought back examples of poems that students in their placements had written. I also experienced success with younger children when I had an opportunity to work with fourth-grade African American girls who were enrolled in an academic summer camp. I read *When Marian Sang* (Ryan, 2002), a picture book biography of Marian Anderson, to the girls. I introduced the book by showing them the cover and encouraging them to share what they knew about Marian Anderson. As I read the text, I displayed the illustrations and invited the students to sing the songs that were included throughout. The songs serve as a commentary on the text, reinforcing events and Marian’s feelings about them. For example, when Mr. Anderson dies, the song Marian sings includes the line, “Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?” When she leaves America to perform in Europe, she sings, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”

After reading, I asked the girls to imagine that they were Marian Anderson and to write about those thoughts and feelings as she would have written about them. I explained that to do this they would write a special kind of poem called an “I am” poem. I provided copies of the “I am” poem format (Levstik & Barton, 1997) for them to use. After they completed their poems, they shared them with the group. Their poems revealed the impact of specific events on their thinking about Marian, particularly the death of Marian’s father and the racism she experienced when she tried to enroll at a music school.

In the example that follows, written by Shayla, I have used conventional spellings for words that she spelled in unconventional ways.

“I Am Marian Anderson”

I wonder if the racism will stop.
I hear singing all the time in my head.
I see in my dream a musical chorus.

I want to be a professional singer.
 I am a singer.
 I pretend that I'm on stage singing.
 I feel rejected sometimes.
 I touch the microphone.
 I worry about my singing.
 I cry about my Daddy.
 I am a singer.
 I understand life.
 I say be thankful for what you have.
 I dream of me and my father alone together singing.
 I am Marian Anderson.

Other students added lines to the "I am" format. For example, Rhonda wrote, "I close my eyes and sing." The cover of the book as well as the illustrations throughout show Marian singing with her eyes closed, and this is also mentioned in the text. As students read their poems to one another, they nodded and clapped, remarking on feelings that they shared and had captured in their poems.

Students as poets

Poets and teachers like Janeczko (1994, 1999) and Koch (1970/1980, 1973/1990; Koch & Farrell, 1981) encouraged students to imitate poems written by others. Dunning and Stafford (1992) also advocated imitation, noting that "We imitate not so much to be like someone else as to learn what she/he has already learned. When we know enough about how a poem is made, we are free to put our own stamp on things" (p. 86).

"I" poems can be compelling invitations for students to try out the poet's way of knowing. Poets pay attention. They notice. They take time to look and listen. They sift experience. They turn things over again and again. When they have something to say, they choose their words carefully. They are precise and concise.

How can teachers elicit such attention and care from students? Inviting and supporting students in writing "I" poems is one way to help students to begin noticing who characters are, why they feel and act as they do, and how they see things; to begin noticing what places are like and what makes one place different from another; and to begin

noticing the impact of the carefully chosen and placed word.

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