

Contemporary Ohio Poets

Ann E. Michael, Anthony Libby,
and Nikki Giovanni

Overview

Where do poets get ideas for their poems? How about right in their own back yards? In this lesson, students learn that subjects for poems can be found all around them. Students will explore several themes, such as roads and rivers, families, and growing up, as they read poems written by Ohioans.

These poems, which are written in free verse, were selected to demonstrate that even non-rhyming poems have a rhythm that is often revealed when the poem is read aloud. As students analyze the structure and content of the poems, they will learn about explication, enjambment, metaphor, and literal and implied meaning. Explication involves carefully examining each line of a poem to determine its meaning and then building understanding of the whole by making connections between images and lines. This skill, which relies heavily on close reading and critical thinking, can then be used whenever students read poetry.

Getting Started

Lesson Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explicate a poem (interpret and explain its meaning)
- Write a paragraph that incorporates sensory description
- Compare and contrast the imagery in two poems
- Write a poem that uses similes and/or metaphors, personification, and enjambment
- Complete an assessment that measures reading comprehension and ability to use terms and reading strategies taught in this lesson

Note: These poems contain complex imagery that may be difficult for a younger reader. This lesson is best suited for grade 8.

Grade Level Indicators

In meeting the above lesson objectives, students will:

- A** Use the text to demonstrate reading comprehension strategies, including the ability to make inferences and observe both literal and implied meaning
- G** Generate writing ideas through discussions with others and from printed material, and keep a list of writing ideas
- H** Use available technology to compose text
- I** Publish writing for display or for sharing with others
- K** Produce informal writings (e.g. journals, notes, and poems) for various purposes

Reading Strategies

Inferring, Making Connections, Using Context Clues, Re-reading, Restating

Time Required: 4 class periods or more

This lesson, which can be taught in its entirety or in part, has two sections of instruction and writing activities for a total of four poems. Sections I and II will each take approximately two class periods (45 minutes each) to teach. Instruction for two additional sections, on the themes of sports and leaving one's hometown, can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/poets.html>.

Activity

Pacing

| | |
|--|------------|
| Section I: The Poetry of Place | 90 minutes |
| Section II: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni | 90 minutes |

Materials Needed

- Road map of Ohio
- Chalkboard or whiteboard
- Student copies of all poems (masters available at the end of this lesson)
- Student copies of the Poetry Glossary (found on page 199 of this Instructor's Guide)
- Student copies of the Explicating Poetry handout (found on page 201 of this Instructor's Guide)

Additional Resources

- (optional) Access to computers with word processing and printing capability
- (optional) Internet access
- (optional) The *Ohio Reading Road Trip* Instructional DVD/ videocassette, television monitor, DVD player or VCR



Biographical information about each of the poets featured in this lesson can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/poets.html>

Prepare to Learn

Explication

Looking for examples in a poem to support your ideas about what the poem might mean is called *explication*. A poem can contain more than one meaning, and students should understand that each meaning can be considered valid if they can successfully explicate it. In order to identify possible meanings and find support within a poem for our ideas, we must read carefully and study how connections can be made throughout the poem.

Distribute the Explicating Poetry handout (master available in this Guide on page 201) and lead students through the six-step explication process.

Section I: The Poetry of Place

Ann E. Michael's "River by River" and Anthony Libby's "Lost in Ohio"

Students will learn to analyze poetry by looking at specific images of Ohio's physical features, such as roadways and rivers. They will be encouraged to visualize places in the state that they know well or have visited as they encounter images in both poems. Finally, they will compare and contrast the two poems.

"River by River" by Ann E. Michael

Write Now!

Brainstorm a list of objects and activities related to taking a long trip by car. Some examples might be highways, maps, rest areas, looking for license plates on cars from different states, and reading road signs. Ask students to use this list as they write a paragraph about traveling on a highway in a car on a hot summer day. Allow 10 minutes for this informal writing and 10 minutes for volunteers to read their work.

Pre-Reading

Now show students an Ohio road map. Ask them to name things that stand out on the map. If they do not mention rivers or lakes, ask them to look more closely. If necessary, point out rivers, which are shown on the map as light blue lines.

Begin by telling students that, as land was settled long ago, rivers were crucial to people's lives. People could fish in the rivers, and in the winter they took ice from the shoreline to preserve their food. Mills and factories were built near rivers both to use the water for power and to transport supplies and finished goods. People also traveled by riverboat. Now, of course, we use roads for most of our transportation. We can build towns and cities without needing a river nearby, so Ohio rivers are now used primarily for recreation. As a result, people may feel that rivers are less useful to us, and they may not think about the rivers and their history very often.



TEACHING TIP

Prepare your students to learn to explicate poetry by reviewing the information on speaker, stanza, and image found in the Relevant Literary Terms section on page 185. They will also use the Explicating Poetry handout found on page 201.

For practical tips for reading poetry aloud, turn to page 184.



VOCABULARY

"River by River"

glimpse
hedge
inconsequential
intersect
navigable
ply
regularity
serpentine
straightaway
ubiquitous

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.

Tell students that the poem they are about to read will tell them more about rivers and roads. Ask them to think about what the speaker is trying to say. As you read this poem, ask students to pay attention to the sounds of the rivers' names.

Discussion Questions

- How are these names different from the names of most highways? *(Possible answers: Rivers are sometimes named for important local people or places. Sometimes, a river's name describes the way the river looked long ago, when it was first mapped. Highways, because they often are simply assigned a number, usually don't offer a glimpse into the past or a description.)*
- What happens in the first two stanzas of the poem? *(The boy reads the map and sees that he and his mother are traveling on a highway that will cross many rivers. He realizes that he has never noticed most of these rivers.)*
- What happens in the last two stanzas of the poem? *(The speaker thinks about why her son has never noticed the rivers.)*
- The poet creates images of rivers and roads in this poem. What words does she use to describe rivers? *(Possible answers: blue lines that move without graph-paper regularity; serpentine paths; green-edged, brown-bodied; familiar as porch rails or door knobs.)* What words does she use to describe roads? *(the road rolls over [the rivers]; a straightaway hedged with barriers; a watery sheen on the highway at noon.)*
- How does the poem make comparisons between the images of rivers and roads? *(Possible answers: the river is serpentine, while the road is a straightaway; the highway looks watery like a river at noon, when the sun is hottest; the road is "hedged" with barriers, just as a river could have hedges or bushes along its banks – and the poet describes the river as green-edged.)*

The speaker of the poem says the rivers are “almost inconsequential.” Remind students of the changing role of rivers as people began to rely on highways instead.

- Ask students to find lines that imply rivers do not matter very much. *(Possible answers: “the road rolls over them,” “glimpsed / briefly at 65 miles an hour,” “no more important / than the ubiquitous / K-Mart or Sunoco station”)*
- “The road rolls over them”: Imagine the wheel of a bicycle or car rolling over a bed of flowers. How does this image relate to the idea that rivers are “inconsequential”?
- “Glimpsed / briefly at 65 miles an hour”: Imagine sitting in a car that is crossing a bridge over a river. How much of the river can you see from the car?



TEACHING TIP
Three-Voice Method (This is the suggested reading technique for presenting all poems in this lesson.)

1. Read the poem aloud to the class.
2. Give students time to reread the poem silently.
3. Ask a student to read it aloud again.

Sometimes teachers begin to discuss a poem by asking, “What lines are confusing to you?” This problem-solving approach zeroes in on difficult passages, but it may not be beneficial to students' appreciation of poetry. Instead, help students learn to read more closely and build on what they already understand.

After students have learned the meaning of all vocabulary words, read “River by River” using the three-voice method. Begin to explore literal and implied meaning by reading the poem from the first line to the first period. Continue moving through the poem section by section.

- “No more important / than the ubiquitous / K-Mart or Sunoco station”: Have students look up or review the meaning of the word *ubiquitous* (“to be everywhere at the same time”). Ask students: What do you notice more: something that you see all the time or something that you haven’t seen very often before?
- In the poem, the poet says that the road “almost manages to make rivers inconsequential.” Why *almost*?
- In the last stanza, the poet writes, “Highway at noon adopts a watery sheen, a course navigable only by illusion; we ply our way across Ohio – river by river.” Ask students: *What do you think this means?* Send students to the dictionary to look up the word *ply* (“to sail or travel back and forth across”).
- What do highways offer that rivers do not? (*Possible answers: speed and convenience*)
- What do rivers offer that highways do not? (*Possible answers: beautiful scenery, ability to experience nature firsthand, connection to history that is older than the roads, etc.*)
- What does the speaker of the poem seem to say about roads and rivers? (*Possible answer: Roads may be the new version of rivers, but she thinks it is important to remember the role rivers once played and the beauty they still bring to the land.*)

“Lost in Ohio” by Anthony Libby

In “River by River,” Ann E. Michael created very different images of roads and rivers. Now students will read a poem by Anthony Libby, titled “Lost In Ohio,” that describes roads with words and images that we might also associate with rivers. After examining this poem, they will compare it with “River by River.”

Personification

Ask students to think of examples of human behavior that are sometimes used to describe non-humans. If they need help, prompt them with examples such as “trees reach for the sky,” “ducks march in a parade,” or “sports cars love to go fast.” Tell students that this is called *personification* – associating human qualities, behavior, or feelings with non-humans. In the poem “Lost in Ohio,” roads and rivers are personified.

Read the poem “Lost In Ohio” using the three-voices method described on the previous page. Tell students to look for examples of personification as they read the poem. Also encourage students to pay special attention to the sounds and rhythms of the poem.



TEACHING TIP

For an activity that can be used to help students understand the difference between literal and implied meaning, turn to page 188.



VOCABULARY

“Lost in Ohio”

dune
hover
lot
unwary

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.



TECHNOLOGY LINK

Ohio poet David Citino discusses the link between poets and rivers on the Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videotape.

Discussion

After finishing reading the poem through with the three-voices method, re-read the first sentence of the poem (lines 1–5) to the class: “Small roads in Ohio go nowhere, / they wander searching, as if thirsty / for an ocean they’ve never seen, / only felt in the traces of salt / on the feet of far-wandering travelers.” Ask students: *When you listen to these lines, what images do you see in your mind?* List their ideas on the board. Ask: *Does this make you think of a road that you’ve traveled on? In what way?*

As shown in this first sentence, many of the lines in this poem are not end-stopped by punctuation. Tell students that such lines are *enjambéd*. Enjambéd lines ask readers to sustain their attention to the sentences and the concepts they describe as each sentence runs over several lines.

Have the students close their eyes, if you like, and listen as you read these lines again. Ask: *Can you think of anything else that wanders toward the ocean?* If no student thinks of “a river,” do not provide the answer; instead, tell them that they will come back to this question as they examine the rest of the poem.

Starting at the beginning of the poem, examine each of the first five lines separately. Examining the poem, as you build it line by line, will help the students find and understand its imagery.

Begin by asking: *Do small roads in Ohio really “go nowhere”?* *What do you think the poet means by this?* If students need help to understand the word “nowhere” in this context, ask: *When you come home from school and your parents ask, “What did you do today?” have you ever said, “Nothing”?* *What did you really mean?*

Now read the following: “Small roads in Ohio go nowhere / they wander searching . . .” Ask: *What images do you see in your mind when you hear these lines?* Allow students to share their ideas. If necessary, prompt them by asking them to think of a person who is wandering about or searching for something. *What does it mean to wander? If someone is wandering around, do they usually know where they’re going? What do you think the poet was trying to say about the roads, in these first two lines or in the title of the poem?*

Expand the discussion to include the third line. “Small roads in Ohio go nowhere / they wander searching, as if thirsty / for an ocean they’ve never seen.” Ask students: *How would you feel if you were one of these small roads?*

Have students look at the first five lines all together now. Tell them to think about “an ocean they’ve never seen, / only felt in the salt / on the feet of far-wandering travelers.” Ask: *Imagine yourself wandering across Ohio, searching for something that you’ve never seen, something you can only dream about. What are some words to describe your feelings?* Make a list of these words on the board.

Now bring students back to the previous question, if necessary: What things also wander toward the ocean? If students still need help thinking of “rivers,” look at a map of the United States. This should help them make the connection. Then tell them: *We talked about how things like roads can*



Throughout this lesson, students will write several poems. To create chapbooks, or small, stapled booklets, that feature final versions of the poems, use the template at <http://www.ohio.readingroadtrip.org/poets.html>

be personified. But we can use personification to make things seem similar to one another as well, if we use the same human qualities to describe two different things. Have students look at lines 1–12. Ask: *How does the poet use personification to make roads seem like rivers?* (The roads are thirsty; dying for water, they swallow a farmer.) You will probably need to help students think of roads, unable to get to the ocean, hovering around the only kinds of water they can find: farm ponds (usually dug by the farmer) and man-made lakes (like the kind you see near highway overpasses, which were dug to provide the dirt to build up the overpass).

Finally, have the students read lines 12–15: “And the roads / accept their lot, somewhere beneath them / the ghosts of failed rivers, / dune dry, and making the best of it.” Ask: *What does it mean, “the roads accept their lot”?* Refer students to the Poetry Glossary on page 199. (Lot means “fortune” or “fate”.) Ask: *How does the poet compare roads and rivers in this last sentence?* (Roads accept their fate just like the dry ghosts of rivers “mak[e] the best of it.”)

Compare and Contrast: “River by River” and “Lost in Ohio”

Write Now!

Write an essay that explicates both “River by River” and “Lost in Ohio” (1–2 paragraphs each) and then compares the images of roads and rivers in these two poems. When writing their explications, students should use the six-step process on the “Explicating Poetry” handout.

Section II: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni:

Nikki Giovanni’s “Legacies” and “Kidnap Poem”

Students will draw upon their own experiences to understand the perspective of the speaker, the little girl, and the grandmother in “Legacies.” They will also look closely at individual lines to determine the poem’s main idea. Students will experience wordplay in the puns that present literal and implied meaning in “Kidnap Poem.” All of this will prepare students to write and explicate a poem of their own that employs concepts demonstrated in the poems in this lesson.

“Legacies” by Nikki Giovanni

Have students brainstorm a list of things that make grandparents feel proud of their grandchildren. (*Possible answers: Seeing their grandchildren learn to do new things, earn good grades, help other people, and take part in family traditions.*)

Tell students that a legacy is something that is handed down from the past. Ask students to offer examples of legacies in their families. Some examples might be an interest in sports or music that is shared by several



Ideas about hosting an event in which students’ families and other caregivers share stories about their own legacies with the students can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/poets.html>

generations or a talent that an older person in the family helped foster in a younger member.

Use the three-voice method to read this poem.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the grandmother is proud when she tells her granddaughter, “I want chu to learn how to make rolls”?
- Do you have any memories from your own life that help you understand why the grandmother feels proud? (Allow a few minutes for students to share their memories, as this will help them access the poem. This is helpful because not all of them may easily relate to making rolls, or to baking in general, for that matter.)
- What is the main idea of the poem? Students may find it helpful to think of the main idea as the “message” that stays with them after the poem is read. They should try to put this in their own words, after they find it in the lines. (Possible answers: *It is very common for family members to not be able to express their feelings for each other; the little girl and her grandmother struggle with the same shyness that keeps them from talking about why making rolls, or not making rolls, is important.*) The last three lines explain or sum up what occurs between the grandmother and the granddaughter.
- What other details in the poem support the main idea? (Possible answers: *The little girl thinking, “. . . when the old one died she would be less / dependent on her spirit”; the grandmother “proudly” calling her granddaughter over to her; the girl struggling with telling her grandmother why she didn’t want to learn to make rolls: “because she knew / even if she couldn’t say it.”*)
- Why doesn’t the little girl want to learn to make rolls? Have you ever known someone in your family who wanted to teach you to do something—but you did not want to learn?

Note that the title of the poem is “Legacies,” not “Legacy.” It is easy to understand things being handed down from older family members to younger ones; in this case, the granddaughter being taught by her grandmother to bake rolls. The title, though, leads us to believe that this is not the only legacy addressed by the poem.

- What are other possible legacies? (Possible answers: *Since the poem says “neither of them ever / said what they meant,” the grandmother might have learned to not “say what [she] meant” from her parents or grandparents; “and i guess nobody ever does” suggests that we all have difficulty expressing our feelings.*)

“Kidnap Poem” by Nikki Giovanni

This poem is, in many respects, unlike the other poems in this lesson. The speaker addresses the reader directly. There is a more playful use of language than in many of the other poems.



If students are particularly interested in contemporary poetry or would benefit from additional instruction, then consider teaching two additional sections, one on sports and the other on leaving one’s hometown. Instruction for these sections can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/poets.html>

Begin by reading the poem aloud to the class. Allow the students time to read it again to themselves, then allow several more students to read it; this poem is especially fun to read aloud.

Allow the students time to talk about what the poem means to them and which lines they like the best.

After students have read the notes at the bottom of the page, ask them if their appreciation for the poem has grown. Giovanni's having fun with language and this seems to start with the idea of putting someone "in" a poem. When we write a poem about someone we know, we might say to him or her, "I put you in my poem." Giovanni here talks about *literally* putting someone in the poem.

Write Now!

Ask students to imagine a poem as something that exists beyond printed words on a page. What might it look like? Brainstorm with them a list of metaphors by writing on the board "A poem is. . ." List ideas below, such as a photograph, a cage, a stage, a bird. Ask each student to draw their metaphor and then write a poem or paragraph that explains the metaphor.

Assessment

This two-part writing project combines creative and non-fiction writing.

1. Ask students to write and revise a poem of at least 20 lines that reflects one of the themes studied in this lesson. Require each poem to have at least one:
 - simile or metaphor
 - example of personification
 - occurrence of enjambment
2. Ask each student to write an explication of the poem he or she has written. The explication should discuss the above concepts, as well as the use of visual imagery and any implied meaning in the poem. Ask students to also choose one poem studied in this lesson to compare and contrast with their own poem.



To help assess students' explications, consider using the Ohio Graduation Test 6-Point Writing Rubric, found on page 183.