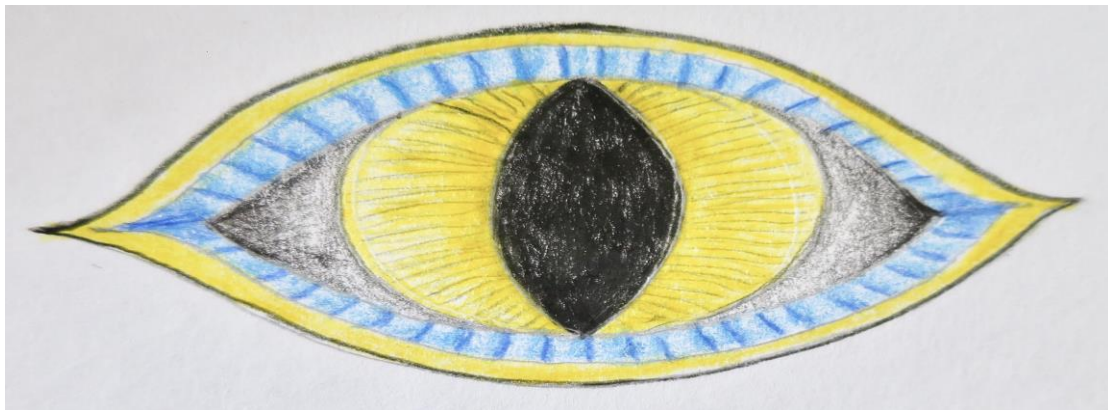




What are you?

Pie Corbett demonstrates how you can use a simple version of a repeating poem like What are You? to liberate the imagination of children.

I first read this writing idea in a poem called 'What you are?' by Roger McGough. You can find the poem in *Roger McGough Collected Poems*. I tried a simple version of the poem idea with my first class and ever since have been using the approach to liberate the imagination.



To write my model poem, I made a long list of things that interested me or that my memory threw up. I did this very rapidly, searching around in my memory, looking around the room, glancing out of the window. I knew that quite a lot of things would be discarded. I then took one that intrigued me – the idea of becoming a dragon's eye. I turned this into a small verse, rather like a haiku:

*You are a dragon's eye staring,
cold as marble,
star-bright.*

and having found my confidence wrote rapidly a long list of ideas – a few of which are in the poem below.

What Are You?

You are a lost glove
found on a path to nowhere,
like a stranded starfish.

You are a meaningful mirror
cracked as a tarantula's web
bringing 7 years of misfortune.

You are the sun shining
on Jack's axe blade
as it slices the stalk.

You are a Siamese cat
curled asleep
like a calm question mark

You are a glass statue
trapped in a cage of elephants.

You are the sound of
a silent scream
echoing between heartbeats.

You are the memory of
my Granny Pointon's cold, thin hand
clutched tight.

You are the distance between
a friend's smile and a bully's sneer.

You are a poem
screwed into a tight fist.

You are number 6
with a snail's back.

You are a peach
like a lost, soft planet.

You are the impossibility of
soft concrete,
a cold sun,
a loud sneeze
& dry water.

You are the guilt we feel
like the ribs of a starving child.

You are Sunday morning
opening its eyes and grinning.

You are at the rainbow's end,
waiting patiently
for what will never arrive.

You are hiding in a cave
watching a spinning wheel weave
petrified dreams.

You are a forgotten wish,
abandoned at the roadside.

You are the taste
of words like lemons,
the sun yellow of a canary
but sharp as vinegar.

You are December
with a cold nose, frozen toes
and one star above.

You are Horseshoe lake
laced with stars
like silver salmon scales.

You are the 8th invisible ring
of Saturn.

You are as
slow as a stone,
as quick as a card trick,
and quiet as moss growing.

You are the girl who became
a glowing shadow,
and the boy who became
a frozen flame.

You are the poem's threads,
tied neatly together like a shoelace.

You are the end.

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Read and Respond

Read through the poem fluently and expressively. Begin with a discussion of preferences - which sections do they like or dislike and why. The aim of this initial discussion is to get them digging deeper into the poem, thinking about its effect on them as readers and the images and ideas it creates. To generate thinking, use a variety of prompts such as:

- *Which ideas are the most surprising and why?*
- *Which ideas interest you the most and why?*
- *Which idea is the cleverest/funniest and why?*
- *Find and explain the hardest idea.*

Create a simple display by the class choosing their favourite ideas and illustrating. Model how to write a short paragraph about a verse of their choosing, using a simple frame, e.g. *'I like the verse about the wolf's eye. The poet is suggesting that the wolf has seen the deer and the deer is aware of the wolf so it pauses. It describes a tense moment that might lead to life or death.'* Finally, split the class into groups so that each group has a section of the poem and work towards a whole class performance.

Analyse the poem

Once everyone has had time to discuss and think about the poem, begin to analyse the various different writing techniques and challenges that the children could use in their writing. This could involve a quick discussion and then immediately modeling with the class joining in before they write several examples using a similar technique or approach.

It's easy enough to spot obvious techniques such as using **alliteration** (repeating similar sounds at the start of words) or using a **simile** with 'like' or 'as' to make a comparison. Look for playful **juxtapositions** of ideas such as 'silent scream' or 'soft concrete'. Note too, the way in which the poem 'names' things – *Granny Pointon's hand, Horseshoe lake, Siamese cat and Manchester* rather than city. Encourage children to draw on places and objects in the locality by making a class list of possibilities.

How about challenges such as having to include a character from a fairy tale, an animal, a fruit or flower, a city, town or village name, a number, a day or the week or month, a planet or an abstract noun (*guilt*). These provide a range of possible prompts that may trigger ideas rather than a checklist of things that must be included.

Some of the verses have a useful phrase that can be borrowed such as 'you are the taste of, the smell of, the sound of' drawing on the senses. You might also try using other phrases such as 'you are the memory of, the impossibility of, the distance between or you are in'.

Creative Alphabets

Before leaping into writing, warm up the imagination and get ideas buzzing with a word race. This could be played solo or in pairs. The children have a set time limit, 5 minutes or less, to complete an alphabet of objects or animals. Use a simple alphabet grid to help:

Alphabet	animal	object
a	ant	alarm
b	bear	bridge
c	cat	car
d	dingo	dust

With a younger group, this could be done as a class. The aim is to produce a bank of possibilities for writing. With older children, create a list of abstract nouns, e.g. *animosity, bravery, calm, danger*.

Likes and dislikes

Try playing '*what I like about*'. In this game, the children have a time limit of several minutes to make a list of things that they like. If the class find generating ideas difficult, do this as a whole class brainstorm. They then have to write '*what they like about*' their chosen ideas using the formula below. Model a few on the board before they write:

What I like about frogs is their trampoline legs.

What I love about clouds is their ever-changing pattern.

What I love about bridges is their curved spine.

What I like about sunlight is its warming touch.

You could also do the same with '*what I dislike about*'.

Class Poetry Writing

By now, the class should have generated a large number of ideas from the games and by looking at the different possible challenges and techniques used in the poem.

Begin by creating a class version using shared writing. Draw on the techniques, challenges and ideas that have been listed. Try to avoid modeling 'over-writing' where the children add in too many adjectives or show-off by using fancy language that they do not understand. Model at a good pace for about ten to fifteen minutes, to make sure the children understand the challenge.

Get them joining in. Be very explicit that this is not to rhyme. Once they seem to be bursting with ideas, move into independent writing. Set them a time challenge of about ten to fifteen minutes and encourage them to write 'hard and fast', silently and in a concentrated manner.

Tim was 8 years old when he wrote his response in about ten minutes. Notice how each idea and word is carefully chosen for effect. He changes 'you are' to 'he is'. Apart from several repetitions (*sharp/golden*) that could be attended to, there are five interesting ideas, each one developed.

He is a misty cloud that floats through a bewildered sky.

He is in swirling smoke that bows at his honour.

He is in a sharp flash of fierce lightning.

He is in the sharp blade of a golden knife.

He is a buzzing fly that shimmers in a golden web.

This idea is playful and yet is also a serious challenge. It can be met at a very simple level and can also be tackled with sophistication and originality. The children will all succeed at their own level, are beginning to grow a sense of confidence in themselves as writers and starting to develop some techniques alongside a sense that writing might be for them as a way of changing or playing with the world. Everyone should be able to have their imagination celebrated.

A different strategy is to start by making a list of abstract nouns with the class that you can go on to explain and expand with them. *For example: heat, doubt, future, hope, shyness, secret, power, energy, joy, disappointment might become:*

I am the shyness of a shrinking shell,

I am the energy of an eternal soul.

You are the secret of a seventh sense,

You are the doubt of a suspicious mind.

Shared writing (3rd and 4th years)

This can be followed by the children's own writing as illustrated here:

You are unique Shetland

You are a crisp cold day
Making me shiver from my nose
to my toes
As I walk over the hill.

You are the peerie* colourful
Puffin
Standing in its cliff-edge burrow
Waiting for its mum to return
with its dinner.

You are the purple heather
Clinging beautifully to the hill
As I run and roll down it.

You are the shiny silvery moon
and the twinkling stars
Shining in the pitch-black sky
Out of my bedroom window.

You are the cold wet sand
Getting washed by the
Stormy grey sea.

You are the playful snow-white
lambs

Jumping around in the green park
Making the most of the long
midsummer.

You are the beautiful green
Mirrie Dancers*
Dancing across the midnight sky
Putting on a show for those
below.

You are the smooth round
pebbles
Getting kicked around by the sea
Waiting to be picked up and
taken home by me.
You are the fierce lashing wild
wind
Throwing up seawater on our
windows
While we are trying to sleep.

You are an interesting rock pool
Bursting with creatures like
crabs and starfish
Waiting for me to come and
explore you.

You are the elegant elusive Orca
Gliding through the deep blue sea
All the way from Iceland to come
and visit me.

You are unique Shetland
I can't wait for my next
adventure with you.

By Isla,
Sandness Primary School
Shetlands

**peerie = small in Shetland dialect*

** Mirrie Dancers = Aurora Borealis in Shetland dialect*

I asked [Duncan Chisholm](#) (one of Scotland's most well known and recognised fiddle players) if he would be interested in recording a piece to go with this poem. Here's what Duncan said: ***"I spread out the lines a little, laid over some Shetland beach sounds and recorded a Shetland air called 'Leaving Lerwick Harbour' ... hope it's ok!!"*** Have a listen to Isla's poem with Duncan performing alongside her:

<https://teachinglive.net/2021/01/14/you-are-unique-shetland/>

Try this approach. You will be amazed by the creative ideas that flow from your class.

Pie Corbett
Talk for Writing