

Poets on Poetry Pedagogy: Sample Modules for Teaching the Series

In his volume *Death to the Death of Poetry* (1995), Donald Hall, former poet laureate and founding editor of the *Poets on Poetry* Series at the University of Michigan Press, refutes the common assumption that poetry is unread, unpopular, and unimportant among those who do not themselves identify as poets; rather, he claims that “our trouble is not with poetry but with the public perception of poetry.” Indeed, more poetry is read and produced in the U.S. today than ever before—but how do we read this poetry? How do we review it, critique it, teach it, and bring it into our conversations about the value of literature both in our classrooms and beyond?

The University of Michigan Press’s *Poets on Poetry* series offers many exciting inroads for thinking about how we read and engage with poetry in both scholarly and public life. The series, which aims to collect “critical works by contemporary poets, gathering together the articles, interviews, and book reviews by which they have articulated the poetics of a new generation,” has published the work of renowned poets like Joy Harjo, Alice Notley, and Yusef Komunyakaa. Additionally, the new digital relaunch of the series promises (in the words of series author Rigoberto González) to help us “look back in order to gain perspective about where we are headed next.” What new directions, new voices, and new perspectives can we bring to the fore by studying this series?

Below, I have outlined five modules that university instructors can adopt or adapt to teach a selection of materials from the *Poets on Poetry* series and relevant supplementary content. The modules have been organized by theme: performing poetry, poetry and visual art, poetry and revision, poetry and the public, and emerging voices in poetry. These modules can be incorporated into a variety of syllabi and are ideal for an undergraduate English course or creative writing course. They can also be enhanced with more theoretical and primary texts for a graduate seminar. Each module comes with a set of driving questions to guide the discussion of the material, a selection of readings, and proposed assignments to help students comprehend and engage with the material. I hope that these modules will serve as a valuable resource for instructors looking to engage with contemporary critical conversations about poetry and poetics.



Module 1: Performing Poetry

Guiding Questions: How can performance change the way we approach a text? What aspects of a text does performance allow us to see/hear/engage with differently? How do words and meanings change when they are read aloud? What role does performance play in the circulation and consumption of poetry? What other kinds of political and cultural conversations can occur in the space of a performance? How can we think capaciously about the concept of “performance” (live versus recorded, conscious or unconscious, public or private)?

Readings:

- Rigoberto González, “The Twenty-First-Century Queer Chicano Poetics of Eduardo C. Corral” from *Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition* (2017), pp. 30-42. Please also listen to an audio recording of Eduardo C. Corral reading his work, available here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016686154/>; and an audio recording of González reading his own poetry, available here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016686109/>.
- Yusef Komunyakaa, “Getting a Shape” from *Condition Red* (2017), pp. 148-156. Please also view Komunyakaa’s reading for the 2011 National Book Festival, available here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-5315/>.
- Sandra M. Gilbert, “All About My Mother (and Me)” from *On Burning Ground* (2009), pp. 61-65. Please also watch a 2013 reading by Gilbert, “Poetry and the End of Life,” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svRbo1xnQ2A>.
- Alice Notley, “Eileen Myles in Performance” and “American Poetic Music at the Moment” from *Coming After* (2005), pp. 57-66, 131-146. Please also watch “Eileen Myles Interview: Poetry as Performance” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRB5N0KfApE>; and listen to an audio recording of Notley reading her poem “At Night the States” here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50834/at-night-the-states>.

Assignment:

- Select a piece of your own writing to read aloud and record. This can be a poem, an essay, a journal entry, or any other piece you have composed. Create a video or audio recording of yourself reading the piece as if you were performing it for a public audience. When you are finished, listen to or view your recording. What do you notice about your own performance? What were you conscious of as you recorded? Are there gestures, body language cues, intonations, patterns of speech and silence, or any other affective qualities of your performance that strike you? Does your performance change the way you read or interpret your own piece of writing? Why or why not? What new meanings emerge (about your piece of writing, about your own writing practice, about yourself as a performer and reader) through your recording? Take some time to write a brief reflective essay or journal entry addressing these questions.

Module 2: Poetry and Visual Art

Guiding Questions: How can we put the textual qualities of poetry into conversation with the visual qualities of mediums like sculpture, painting, and collage? What language can we use to talk about the poetics of visual art and the visual aspects of poetry? What kinds of distinctions do we make between texts and other kinds of media, and for what purpose? What do spaces like museums or art galleries have to offer to our discussions of poetry and poetics? What does it mean to be a critic/scholar/spectator of poetry vs. of visual art?

Readings:

- John Yau, “The Poet as Art Critic” and “Street Song: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Poetry of Kevin Young” from *The Passionate Spectator: Essays on Art and Poetry* (2006), pp. 40-65, 87-101. Please also view Basquiat’s painting *Hollywood Africans* (1983), available here: <https://whitney.org/collection/works/453>.
- Kazim Ali, “Poet Crossing Borders” from *Resident Alien* (2015), pp. 121-151.
- Alice Notley, “Ron Padgett’s Visual Imagination” from *Coming After* (2005), pp. 27-41.
- Robert Hayden, selections from “A Romantic Realist” and “The Poet and His Art: A Conversation” from *Collected Prose* (1984), pp.125-128, 202-203. Please also read Hayden’s “The Peacock Room” (1975) and “Monet’s ‘Water Lilies’” (1970); and view Monet’s painting *Water Lilies* (1906), available here: <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/16568/water-lilies>.

Assignment:

- Plan a visit to your local museum, or find a museum website that is of interest to you (for example, the University of Michigan Museum of Art offers free reservations to students, and the website can be found here: <https://umma.umich.edu/>). Select a piece of visual art at your chosen museum that you think speaks to the concept of “poetics.” It may remind you of a particular poem, inspire a poem of your own, or have qualities that you find “poetic” in a broader sense. After you have selected your visual art piece, take a few minutes to write down 1) what you notice about the piece (colors, textures, shapes, familiar figures, strange or unexpected details, etc.) 2) why you think these details might matter. Drawing from your notes, write a brief essay on the connections you are making between your visual art piece and poetry/poetics. What details are key to your analysis? How do you articulate a visual piece’s poetics? What elements of the piece resist meaning or interpretation?

Module 3: Poetry and Revision

Guiding Questions: What are the benefits of revising our work? What are some effective strategies for revision? How can we improve our writing by paying attention to the feedback we receive from our peers, colleagues, and mentors? What are the advantages and challenges of a process like peer review? How can we provide effective feedback on others' writing and structure it so that it helps both the writer and reader? What kind of feedback and revision processes do we, as writers, find most helpful? When do we stop revising (if we ever do)? How can we think more broadly about re-vision as a process of seeing and thinking differently?

Readings:

- Joy Harjo, "The Creative Process" from *The Spiral of Memory* (1996), pp.14-19.
- Claudia Keelan, "Interview for Omnidawn Press conducted by Rusty Morrison (Truth of My Songs: Poems of the Trobairitz)" from *Ecstatic Émigré* (2018), pp. 153-158.
- Yusef Komunyakaa, "Notes from a Lost Notebook" from *Condition Red* (2017), pp. 179-189.
- Kazim Ali, "Syllabus for a Semester on Silence" from *Resident Alien* (2015), pp. 187-189.
- Donald Hall, selections from "Working Journal" and "Poets Talking" from *Death to the Death of Poetry* (1995), pp.10-17, 117-121.
- Optional supplemental reading: Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" from *College English* 34.1 (1971), pp. 18-30.

Assignment:

- Select a piece of writing that you would like to keep working on (a poem, an essay, an academic article, a journal entry, a short story, etc.). Take one hour to revise your piece, and/or make a plan for future revisions. Keep track of any changes you make, and reflect on why you made those changes. Likewise, take note of what you think is working well and what you left unchanged. After your individual revisions, form a small group with 1-2 of your peers and complete a one-hour peer review workshop. Exchange your work with your peers and highlight three major areas/questions where you would like your peers' feedback on your work. Take turns sharing your work and asking your questions, and be sure to leave time at the end of your workshop to address any lingering questions or additional feedback you all may have for each other. Throughout the workshop, take notes on your peers' responses. What did they notice about your work that you didn't in your individual revisions? What suggestions did you find particularly helpful or vexing? How does it feel to revise in a group versus on your own? Take some time to reflect on these questions.

Module 4: Poetry and the Public

Guiding Questions: What is the role of poetry in public life? What do we make of assertions about poetry's unpopularity, its marginal status in the world of literature, and its private or academic rather than public nature? What transformative power or potential for social and political change can poetry have? How can performance, including poetry readings, help make poetry more accessible to the public? Are there any challenges that come with the public proliferation and popularization of poetry? How might we connect this discussion about poetry/poetics to larger conversations about work in the "public humanities" at our universities and academic institutions?

Readings:

- Donald Hall, "Death to the Death of Poetry" from *Death to the Death of Poetry* (1995), pp. 18-26.
- Sandra M. Gilbert, "Why Do We Write: Some Thoughts on the Coin That Sings" from *On Burning Ground* (2009), pp. 3-7.
- Robert Hayden, "'How it Strikes a Contemporary: Reflections on Poetry and the Role of the Poet'" from *Collected Prose* (1984), pp 3-16. Listen to an audio file of the 1978 Library of Congress lecture here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/91740837/>.
- Yusef Komunyakaa, "How Poetry Helps People to Live Their Lives" from *Condition Red* (2017), pp. 212-213.
- Interview with Joy Harjo, "An Echo of Something Not Finished: Poet Laureate on These Turbulent Times." *KNPR* (2020), available here: <https://knpr.org/knpr/2020-09/echo-something-not-finished-poet-laureate-these-turbulent-times>

Assignment:

- In a small group or independently, research an example of poetry (or a poet) taking on a significant public role. For example, you might think about Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb," read at the 2021 U.S. presidential inauguration of Joe Biden. Your example does not have to be contemporary, nor from an anglophone/U.S. context. As you research, keep these questions in mind: what is the relevant historical context here? What is the power of poetry in this particular example? How and why does the poem/poet take on a larger public significance? What "turbulent times" or "transformative moments" (to use the words of Joy Harjo) seem to call out for poetry here? What political, social, and cultural messages, if any, is the poem/poet sending? Why poetry, and not some other artform? Does this poet have a history of using a public platform or of participating in public and political life? What challenges does this example present to contemporary participants, modern readers, etc.? Prepare a 7-10 minute presentation detailing your example and summarizing your answers to these questions.

Module 5: Emerging Voices in Poetry

Guiding Questions: How have canons of poetry (particularly in the U.S. and anglophone tradition) traditionally been conceived and formed? Who is included and who is excluded? What do poets with historically marginalized identities, social positions, and voices have to offer to poetry as a genre and to our study of poetry? How can we think critically and closely about poetry in translation and in languages besides English? What would it mean for the “canon” to center queer poets, poets of color, immigrant poets, disabled poets, and others writing from the margins? How can we connect this discussion about emerging voices in poetry to larger conversations happening in the academy and the world about anti-racism, de-colonization, accessibility, and social justice?

Readings:

- Joy Harjo, “The Story of All Our Survival: Interview with Joseph Bruchac” from *The Spiral of Memory* (1996), pp. 20-35.
- Rigoberto González, “Latino Poetry: Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition” and “Alurista: Towards a Chicano Poetics” from *Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition* (2017), pp. 3-16, 17-29. You may also watch the video recording of González’s Library of Congress lecture here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-6313>.
- Yusef Komunyakaa, “The Devil’s Secretary” from *Condition Red* (2017), pp. 37-51.
- Claudia Keelan, “The Citizen-Stranger: An Ethics of Definition” from *Ecstatic Émigré* (2018), pp. 115-123; please also read Keelan’s poem “To the New World,” available here: <https://aprweb.org/poems/to-the-new-world>

Assignment:

- Pretend that you are a reviewer tasked with writing a review for a well-known literary magazine (for example, *The New Yorker* or *The Kenyon Review*). Choose a collection of poetry to review that you think represents an “emerging voice” in poetics, whether that is because the author is writing from the margins, or because you think the collection has received too-little attention. Your example does not have to be contemporary, nor from an anglophone/U.S. context (in fact, I encourage you to seek out bilingual and translated collections). Write a two page review addressing the following questions: why do you think this collection deserves greater critical attention? How is the author/collection contributing something original, unexpected, or exciting to the world of poetry? How does the author/collection expand upon and complicate traditional conceptions of the poetic canon? Whose voices and perspectives does the collection represent, and why is this important? What are some particular poems that you can cite from the collection to support your arguments? What details in these poems are most striking to you? Be prepared to share your review with the class.