

A TEACHING GUIDE

created by **PATRICE VECCHIONE**


INK KNOWS NO BORDERS

POEMS OF THE IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE EXPERIENCE



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This curriculum guide was created by
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No Borders.

TRIANGLE SQUARE
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
AN IMPRINT OF
SEVEN STORIES PRESS

New York * Oakland * London



140 Watts Street New York, NY 10013

www.sevenstories.com



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Praise for *Ink Knows No Borders*





“I was moved again and again by the poems in this brave, beautiful and necessary collection. I found echoes of myself in many of the pieces, and I know so many young immigrants and Americans will find themselves, too. But it goes beyond that. I wish this book would be taught in homogenous communities, too, so readers with little understanding of immigration will have the chance to see its humanity. This is the most important book we will read this year.”
—Matt de la Peña, *NY Times* bestselling and Newbery Award winning author



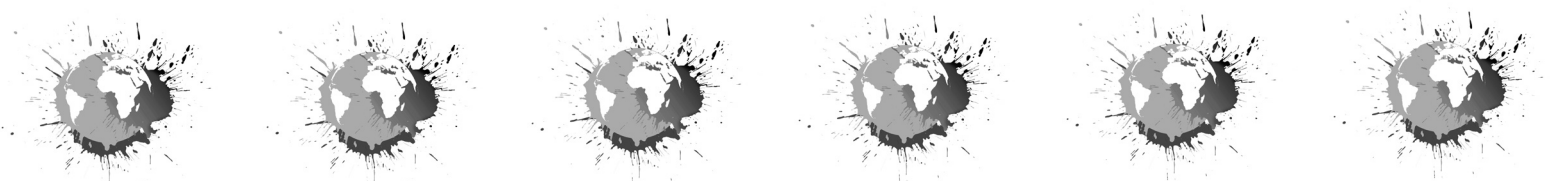
* “This collection cuts right to the heart of the matter at a time when it is most relevant. But as these pieces—originally published between 1984 and 2018—show, immigration stories are perennially relevant. Authors take their pain and use it to paint gripping accounts of racism, culture shock, separation from family, and the splitting of one’s self that so often occur when dwelling within, outside, and along borders. It is but a glimpse into all the hardships—emotional, physical, mental and otherwise—that displaced people face. This symphony of poetry is a necessary series of bruises and balms that will comfort those who have endured, uplift those who continue to struggle, and educate others.”
—**Kirkus Reviews*, starred review



“Vecchione and Raymond have gathered 64 poets from all over the world, their poetic voices as diverse as their experiences. Yet, they hold one element in common: a belief in dignity as an essential human right. . . . these stories should resonate with youth who feel life deeply.” —*Booklist*



“An intricate, hard-won tapestry of poetic experience, with density best suited to thoughtful browsing or individual readalouds rather than reading straight through but with many resonant poems that will strike a chord either of recognition or realization with young readers.”
—*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*



Introduction

An anthology of 64 poems, *Ink Knows No Borders* brings together some of the most compelling and vibrant voices today reflecting the experiences of teen immigrants and refugees.

No matter who your students are, there is plenty within the pages of *Ink Knows No Borders* to inspire young adults of all backgrounds to write poems. Many of the struggles immigrant and refugee teens face head-on are similar to those experienced by young people everywhere as they contend with issues at the approach of adulthood— isolation, self-doubt, confusion, and emotional dislocation. The poems address cultural and language differences, homesickness, social exclusion, human rights, racism, stereotyping, and questions of identity. Readers of *Ink Knows No Borders* will be encouraged to honor their roots as well as explore new paths, offering empathy and hope for those who are struggling to overcome discrimination.

Guiding students to write poetry is often challenging for teachers because it's a less-taught form and may seem off-putting. In this guide, educators will find specific suggestions to encourage their students to write poetry with ease, or relative ease, anyway! Writing has struggle inherent in it. How does a young writer take what's at least partially non-verbal—an experience, thoughts, feelings—and, in effect, translate it into words?

In order to write well, writers of any age need to feel safe, somewhat confident, curious, and open to possibilities. The only way to write originally is to be daring, to take chances. If you put words together that have never sat so near before, it can feel awkward. What if the word “blue” doesn't feel right beside the word “destroy”? OK. But what if it does? For teens, taking chances is part and parcel of everyday life, but maybe they don't want anybody to see them taking certain chances. Because young adults are often lacking in confidence, self-doubt can topple creativity if given the chance. That's where feeling safe, open, and curious comes in. Mistakes, failures even, need to be viewed as part of the experience of writing. Young writers need to know they're the boss of their own poems, that nobody will read what they don't choose to share.

There's a misunderstanding about writing—in whatever form—that we ought have a firm handle on what we want to say before starting out. Truly, all you need is an inkling of what you might say as though someone were whispering in your ear. It's this barely-an-idea that a writer writes into and toward, a possibility. And this is one of my favorite things about the writing process, that what comes onto the page is a surprise; though I've got a sense of what I want to say, content morphs as it goes from being a feeling or a glimmer of thought and is transformed into language. (Of course, some poets have a clear idea before starting out but most stay open to whatever shows up.)

Of all the forms of writing, poetry is the most magical and surprising. It resembles prayer and dream.

With this in mind, encourage your students to experiment, to play around. A rough draft should be just that—rough. False starts aren't actually false, they're leads on the trail to what the writer will say.

Poetry's Uniqueness

A single poem can disagree with itself. A poem can be made up of incomplete sentences, phrases that are linked together even if, at first, the poet doesn't know how they're connected. Sometimes poems rhyme and sometimes they don't. A poem can look like a two-dimensional piece of sculpture, and the design of a poem on the page (or screen) is part of its identity. A poem can be short and take up only a few lines or it can go on for multiple pages.

Remember This

Not every poem is meant to be shared with others. Students need to know that they're in control of who gets to read what they write. Over a period of as many weeks, have your class write five poems (or three!). Tell the students that they'll need to pick one of the five to share (in whatever way you or they choose: the students can read their poem to one other person, they can take their poem from rough draft to final form and publish in an informal class poetry anthology, they can share their poem on a school blog, or they can share another way.)

Patrice's Unusual Rules for Writing Poems

1. Your poem doesn't have to make sense. (It probably will but don't start out with that as the primary intention.)
2. There is no wrong way to write a poem.
3. Don't plan what you're going to say. Let yourself be surprised by your own ideas
4. Trust your imagination.
5. Spelling, punctuation, grammar, and neatness are irrelevant in a first draft.

Poetry Writing Suggestions Inspired by poems from *Ink Knows No Borders*

These suggestions are written directly to students. Please take what you, as the teacher, find useful, inspiring, and disregard the rest.

1/. "Departures: July 30, 1984," by Joseph O. Legaspi, page 1

Have you too had to leave your home, either to move to another place in the same city, to another town, another state, or like some of the writers in *Ink Knows No Borders*, to another country? The collection begins with "Departures: July 30, 1984" because the poem describes an experience of leaving home in a way that the reader feels the disorienting sense of leaving too.

In the first stanza Joseph Legaspi writes, "My siblings and I approached/ our inevitable leave with numb/ acceptance, as people do under martial law." Right away the poet tells us that his departure

is not one of choice but of necessity. He conveys a not unusual experience for a child, that of being uninformed about what’s happening: “Our mother did not sit us down/ to explain...”

Likely, that’s happened to you, in relation to moving or to other things.

As the poem continues, Legaspi tells the reader about household objects being removed from their home, given to friends and relatives, and how people came to say goodbye. Then the family leaves for the airport, what his older sister who stayed behind would later refer to as “this disappearing act.” Moving can feel that way for those left behind.

Suggestions for Writing

1/. Recall your own experience of moving. Begin by jotting down whatever thoughts, memories, and impressions come to you without attempting to form a poem. Is there one item on your list that speaks the loudest to you. Take that as your starting point and write whatever comes to mind. If you have not moved yourself, think about witnessing others’ moving away—friends or family—and remember how it felt to be the one left behind.

2/. I’m thinking about the experience of disappearing, connected to moving and other things, too. Sometimes we’re in situations that we wish we could vanish from. Other times, someone’s left, making us ache for their return. Or you may have experienced a time when you felt invisible. Either you were different from others and ignored for being so or you felt different and disconnected, which is another kind of disappearance and just as valid and worthy of a poem.

Write about any side of these experiences. What happens when you disappear? Where—in yourself—do you go? When someone has left you, what remains in their absence or takes its place—loneliness, frustration, fear or, in other cases, delight?

2/. “Dear America,” by Sholeh Wolpé, page 10

Sholeh Wolpé talks to our country as if she were speaking to a person. Can’t you just feel this America person coming into her room at night when she was a child, infusing her imagination? Wolpé was in Iran when her love affair with America began. About her poem, she writes, “I kept going back to my journey towards America which in my young life was not a country but a dream space, somewhere out there.”

Wolpé romanticizes America until she arrives. And then it’s a different story entirely. At the poem’s end I’m left with the sense that not only has arrival here been harsh but that the experience has taken Wolpé from childhood to young adulthood, perhaps, too fast.

Suggestions for Writing

1/. Write a letter to a place as a poem or as a straight-ahead letter. By beginning with the formality of “Dear,” you may find it easier to personify this place, to imagine it as having personality in the way a human being does. Truthfully, all places have personalities but we don’t all experience them in the same way. There are things as simple as climate and the differences determined by geography and whether a place is rural or urban. The way a pine forest smells is one thing. The way it smells in a subway station is another. Engage your five senses.

2/. Think about a place you long to go to, somewhere you’ve never been. It could be a country, a part of the U.S., a part of the city where you live that you’ve yet to visit—whatever strikes your imagination at the moment. Before going to a new place, we use our imaginations to fill in all that we don’t know about it in an attempt to picture it ahead of time. Sometimes we envision it better than it turns out to be, sometimes not as good, but, in any case, differently. You could write about somewhere you’re actually planning to visit or move to, somewhere you want to see or, even, a place you think so badly of that you’d never want to go.

3/. “A Hymn to Childhood,” by Li-Young Lee, page 16

We tend to think of our childhoods as being singular, that, of course, we have a childhood at all. Li-Young Lee tosses that idea out with “A Hymn to Childhood.” The way he opens the poem—its very first line—“Childhood? Which childhood?” unsteadies readers by making us question the very idea of childhood.

How many childhoods did you have? Did any of them cause you to be fearful? We don’t, of course, behave a singular way, not as kids and not as adults. There is the self we show at school, the one reserved for friends, that part of us that’s kept for family life, and the self we may keep entirely private. Did each of those parts of yourself experience childhood differently? Might there be a poem there, the one only you can write?

When a child has to move often because of trauma and turmoil, and the political strife becomes personal, distrust and caution can grow in a child. There may be a sense of before and after, before a too-young loss of innocence and after.

Suggestions for Writing

1/. Many children are asked to keep still. When parents are engaged in conversation or work, they may want or need the kids to be quiet. Another reason for keeping still has to do with fear. That will cause anyone to stop moving, to still the body’s outward movements while the heart pounds like crazy.

Write about an experience of keeping still, either because it was required of you or because of being so thoroughly engaged in an activity—reading, drawing, playing a game. You might even contrast different kinds of stillness in a single poem. Or because you were afraid and listening for what might happen next.

2/. In several places in his poem, Li-Young Lee asks, “Which childhood?” Write about your childhood or your childhoods. Did that time speed past or is it still with you? And what about the childhood Lee considers when he refers to the one that never ends? Do you carry childhood with you? Which parts of it do you think you will remember most, and why?

4/. “The Break-In,” by Hafizah Geter, page 27

When she was a small child, Hafizah Geter left Nigeria and immigrated to the U.S. with her family. In her poem “The Break-In,” she recalls a very frightening early experience. It’s through closing her eyes that she returns to childhood memories. Notice how the poem isn’t a single narrative but a series of quick and immediate flashbacks that the reader can almost see as if on a TV screen. The poem has a kind of staccato feel to it that builds. It’s almost a list poem.

Geter believes that poetry’s power is that it “cannot be controlled.” This poem feels that way. She says, “The very act of speaking up in a world that tries to silence you—especially when you’re coming from a marginalized identity—can actually have life or death consequences.”

Suggestions for Writing

1/. Close your eyes and let your mind drift back to childhood. What do you see? What memories in the form of pictures come to you? Choose one and explore it by writing a poem.

2/. Choose bits and pieces from several recollections and create your own list poem. A list poem may appear random on the page and, certainly, in a first draft, it is. But sit with that draft for a bit, maybe put it in a drawer for a few days. When you pull it out, you may find that just by reordering the items on the list, you can make the poem build, you can find its momentum.

3/. In her comment about poetry, Geter touches on speaking up and about silencing. What’s your speaking up poem? And have you been silenced? These are two ideas that may generate strong responses and a lot of material.

5/. “Choi Jeong Min,” by Franny Choi, page 33

“in the first grade i asked my mother permission/ to go by frances at school. at seven years old.” Young as she was, Choi had already tired of hearing her name mispronounced. She had already tired of sticking out for being different. No wonder she wanted to change her name.

How about you? Do you use the name given to you at birth? A nickname? Or one you’ve given yourself?

Suggestions for Writing

1/. Write a poem about your name—the name you’re called by friends or the one you got at birth or, even, the one you call yourself. Maybe they’re the same. I’ll bet when you were in elementary school you might have written an acrostic poem, taking each letter of your name as the first letter of the first word of a new line. Sure, it’s a gimmicky way to enter a poem but it might just work, and that’s what matters. It also might be a way to brainstorm. Could you write an acrostic name poem as a single sentence?

2/. Near the beginning of “Choi Jeong Min,” the poet writes, “i wanted to be a writer & worried/ about how to escape my surname—choi...” Have you ever felt that to be something you wanted to be you were stopped by a part of your identity, your family, your city, your nationality, race or gender? There’s plenty of fuel for poetry there. What’s stopped you? Why? And how have you coped?

6/. “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears,” by Mohja Kahf, page 50

A grandmother washing her feet in a public bathroom? To the other shoppers in the women’s bathroom that’s not just odd, but an affront to the way things are done or should be done in that particular place. But to the poet’s grandmother, washing her feet was essential to her prayer ritual which needed to take place at a particular time. This poem tosses the idea of respectable behavior right on its head!

The person the reader may most identify with is, of course, the author, the girl who knows both the language her grandmother speaks and the English of the other shoppers, the girl who is put in an awkward position, the girl straddling two cultures. Can you feel her embarrassment and sense of uncertainty? Without saying a thing, she rises above the other shoppers' narrow thinking, without ditching her grandmother either. The girl opens the bathroom door for everybody!

Suggestions for Writing

1/. What cultural or familial traditions are you growing up with? Are they in sync with most others where you live or do they cause you to stand out? Do those traditions make you proud at times and embarrassed at others? Choose a tradition from your own family, from your own heritage, that either you appreciate or feel uncomfortable with and write about it. You could begin with the word "We" and describe how something is done in your family or like Kahf, name the person in your family or community who carries on a tradition that comes from another country.

2/. Most of us, at one point or another, or at many points, by the time we're teens, have felt embarrassed by something our parents or grandparents have said or done in front of us in public. Perhaps it's the kiss goodbye your father insists on giving you even though you're 15. Or words spoken in a language that others don't understand, making it all too evident, in that moment, that your family comes from another place. The feeling of wishing to be invisible when something like that happens is pretty universal. Write about a time this has happened to you and the feeling of embarrassment that may come over you like a blush going from head to toe.

7/. "The Border: A Double Sonnet" by Alberto Rios, page 110

There are many types of sonnets, as you may know—Italian and Shakespearean are two. The word "sonnet" translates as "little song." Sonnets are poems with 14 lines; they usually rhyme and often have ten syllables per line. That said, poetry is about nothing if not about breaking rules. It's helpful to know the rule you're breaking though, that way you understand the form and actually have more control over it. Rios' double sonnet is just that, a 28-line poem. It doesn't, however, rhyme, nor do the lines have ten syllables.

In addition to "The Border" being a double sonnet, it's also a list poem, though quite different from the approach taken by Hafizah Geter in "The Break-In." By beginning each line with the words "The border," Rios creates a border, a physical line that we encounter 28 times in the poem which reinforces its solidity and rigidity. The words also give Rios a jumping off point to dive into what he'll next say. Notice the many different directions he takes the reader in though he starts the same way each time. Rios tells us the border is a line that birds don't recognize and a couple lines later, that it's immutable. He tells more than a single truth in this poem. Then he ends it with a bad smell, the bad smell that a border can have.

Suggestions for Writing

1/. What's the meaning of the border to you, the border between the United States and Mexico or, perhaps, another border entirely. What about the border between childhood and adulthood, poverty and wealth, day and night, joy and sorrow, now and later, here and there. Write about a border

that has significance in your life, either a physical one or one that's abstract, a bordering experience perhaps. Remember that though the poem will be a list, the poem will be strongest if the order of its parts isn't arbitrary.

2/. Try your hand at writing a sonnet, a little song, a love poem, even. You could get quite formal, choosing a rhyme scheme and sticking to it or simply keeping to the precise number of lines.

* * * * *

There are as many ways to approach writing poems as there are students in your classes. This guide offers some of Vecchione's most successful practices and advice. Juan Felipe Herrera says, "Let me tell you what a poem brings... / it is a way to attain a life without boundaries," and writing a poem is a way to unleash the imagination and through it to create something vital and true. Vecchione often says to her students—young and old—"If you don't tell your story or write your poem, it won't be told. Nobody knows what you do. You're the only one who can write what you will." More detailed guidance is forthcoming in her new book, *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice: A Guide to Writing Poetry and Speaking Your Truth* (Triangle Square Books for Young Readers, April 2020).

Patrice Vecchione is a poet, nonfiction writer and teacher who discovered poetry when she needed it most—as a teenager. She has edited several highly acclaimed anthologies for young adults including most recently, *Ink Knows No Borders: Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience* (Triangle Square Books for Young Readers/Seven Stories Press, 2019), which Newbery Award winning author, Matt de la Peña, called "the most important book we will read this year." Other anthologies include (from Henry Holt) *Truth & Lies*, which was named one of the best children's books by *School Library Journal*, *Revenge & Forgiveness*, and *Faith & Doubt*, named a best book of the year for young adults by the American Library Association. She's the author of *Writing and the Spiritual Life* (McGraw-Hill) and *Step into Nature: Nurturing Imagination and Spirit in Everyday Life* (Beyond Words/Atria), as well as two collections of poetry. For many years, Patrice has taught poetry and creative writing to young people (often working with migrant children) through her program, "The Heart of the Word: Poetry and the Imagination." She is also a columnist for her local daily paper, *The Monterey Herald*, and has published essays on children and poetry for several outlets including the *California Library Association Journal*.
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Ink Knows No Borders
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 9781609809072 | \$15.95 | Trade Paperback | 208 pages

