

Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe Poetry Challenge:

Cracking the Code of Creative Writing

with Jo Watson Hackl,
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(Random House Children's Books/Yearling Adventure)

- Amazon Teacher's Pick
- Winner, Southern Book Prize
- "Read Across America" selection
- *Kirkus* starred review



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Poetry isn't just about rhymes – it's about making words come alive! Good poets help readers see, hear, feel, and imagine by choosing words carefully and using creative techniques. Novelists do the same thing. They don't just tell a story, they show it, using language that makes the reader experience the world that they create. In this lesson, you'll explore how writers use a variety of poetic techniques to bring their words to life.

Your Mission:

Learn to paint pictures with your words, just like a poet! You'll focus on four key writing techniques:

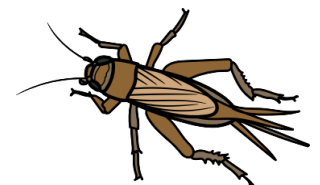
- Imagery – Words that help readers imagine what's happening using their senses
- Simile – Comparing two things using “like” or “as” (example: The clouds were like giant marshmallows in the sky.)
- Metaphor – Comparing two things directly without “like” or “as” (example: Time is a thief.)
- Personification – Giving human qualities to things that aren't human (example: The wind whispered its secrets.)

STEP ONE: Word Detectives

Cricket is always on the lookout for clues in the book. Now it's your turn! Just like the way a detective searches for hints, you'll look for examples of how the author makes the story come alive. These are the “clues” that help readers see, hear, and feel what's happening in the story.

What to Do:

1. Choose two or three of the following passages from the story.
2. Circle the words or phrases that seem especially vivid or paint a strong picture.
3. Decide which device the author is using. Above the words, write “I” for imagery, “S” for simile, “M” for metaphor, and “P” for personification.
4. Think about these questions:
 - What image or feeling does this create?
 - Why do you think the author described it this way?



Page 16

Meandering with Mama while Daddy was offshore was like wearing a special pair of glasses, part binocular, part microscope. Mama never walked anywhere. She ambled. She skipped. She strolled.

“Walking is for other people,” she always told me.

“What people?” I would ask.

“Those people. People who don’t see things the way we do. We’re meanderers, Cricket. We pay attention.”

Mama would have noticed the way the clouds were starting to look like curled-up cats and the way the crows were flying from tree to tree in front of me. She would have noticed the sweet smell of tea olive trees and walked forever to pick a sprig for my room. She would have braved the thorny branches above my head to bring me back the last wild orange.

Now I shivered as the wind pecked at my cheeks, the turnoff to the old dirt road just ahead.

What poetic devices did the author use? Please circle and label them. How do those devices add to the meaning of the passage or the way that the passage makes you feel?

Page 24

We walked half the morning until I spotted that ginkgo tree. Its limbs spread out, inviting me to climb up on in. In the speckled sunlight, its fan-shaped leaves quivered in sixteen shades of green. "This is it," I said.

What poetic devices did the author use? Please circle and label them. How do those devices add to the meaning of the passage or the way that the passage makes you feel?

Page 76

My brain had two sharp edges now, but only one of them was happy. The finding-food-and-keeping-warm part was ready to celebrate. Our fire was going strong, and my coat pockets were filled with hickory nuts and greens. But the other edge, the solving-the-puzzle part, was itchy and mad. We'd covered a lot of ground but hadn't found anything shimmering.

What poetic devices did the author use? Please circle and label them. How do those devices add to the meaning of the passage or the way that the passage makes you feel?

Page 84

The clouded-up sky looked like eraser smudges on worn-out paper. White frost covered the leaves. Hundreds of spiderwebs hunkered just off the ground, in every low bush.

What poetic devices did the author use? Please circle and label them. How do those devices add to the meaning of the passage or the way that the passage makes you feel?

Page 96

Pain shot through my left ankle. It felt like I'd just touched the prong of a half-plugged-in lamp cord.

I lurched back.

The snake coiled fat and low.

Those yellow eyes didn't show one speck of mercy. An hourglass pattern stretched down his pink-brown back. He wriggled his tail, but there wasn't a rattle. His overripe cucumber smell hit my nose, and I knew.

What poetic devices did the author use? Please circle and label them. How do those devices add to the meaning of the passage or the way that the passage makes you feel?

STEP TWO: Clue Hunting

Now it's your turn to explore the book on your own!

Choose a page or section from *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*. Look for examples of imagery, similes, metaphors, or personification.

Write down each example, label the device, and explain what feeling or image it creates.

STEP THREE: Write Like a Poet

Use the techniques you found to write your own descriptive paragraph. Choose a place, memory, or moment and include:

- One simile or metaphor
- One example of personification
- At least one sensory detail (imagery)

Your Goal: Write like a storyteller and a poet. Make your reader feel as though they are right there with you in the scene!

The Poetry of Emily Dickinson

with *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*

As Cricket searches for her mom in *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*, she remembers one of her mother's favorite poems by Emily Dickinson, "Hope is the Thing with Feathers." In this lesson, you'll explore Emily Dickinson's life and poetry, learn about metaphors, and see how the poem connects to the characters in the book.

Your Mission:

Discover how Emily Dickinson used poetry to show feelings and ideas. By the end of this lesson, you'll:

- Define a metaphor and find examples in Dickinson's poem "Hope is the Thing with Feathers."
- Explain how "hope" is like "the thing with feathers."
- Understand new words in the poem.
- Notice how the poem affects the characters in *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*.

STEP ONE: Read the Poem

In *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*, Cricket's mom loved Emily Dickinson's Poem #314, "Hope is the Thing with Feathers."

Read the poem aloud. Listen carefully to the language and images that Dickinson used.

STEP TWO: Vocabulary Detective

- Look up the meanings of these words in the poem: perch, gale, sore, abash, chilliest, extremity
- Write down each definition and try to use the word in a sentence about the poem.

STEP THREE: Explore the Metaphor

- Dickinson compares hope to a bird. Think: How are hope and a bird similar? Why do you think she made this comparison?
- Discuss with a partner or as a class how comparing an abstract idea to a living thing can help readers see, feel, and imagine.

STEP FOUR: Connect to the Book

On pages 50–51, Cricket says, “Hope is the thing with feathers.’ Mama also said it every time she saw a cardinal.”

Questions to consider:

- Why do you think Mama liked this poem? What might she have been hopeful for?
- On page 113, Percy seems to enjoy the poem too. Why might that be?
- What is something you are hopeful for? Write a poem about it.

STEP FIVE: Create Your Own Comparison

Emily Dickinson compares hope to a bird. What else could hope be compared to? Write a few ideas and explain why you chose them.

MORE ACTIVITIES

- Write your own poem comparing an emotion (such as joy, fear, friendship, or anger) to a living thing.
- Create a poster of Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope is the Thing with Feathers," illustrating what it means to you.
- Choose another one of Emily Dickinson's poems to read and explain to the class. Why did you pick the poem you chose?
- Research Emily Dickinson's life. What facts might explain why she was misunderstood?



The Poetry of Walt Whitman

with *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*

In *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*, Miss V reads Whitman to Percy. Whitman's lines – especially "I contain multitudes" – help us think about how people can hold lots of different feelings, ideas, and contradictions. In this lesson you'll read Whitman and connect his ideas to the characters in the novel.

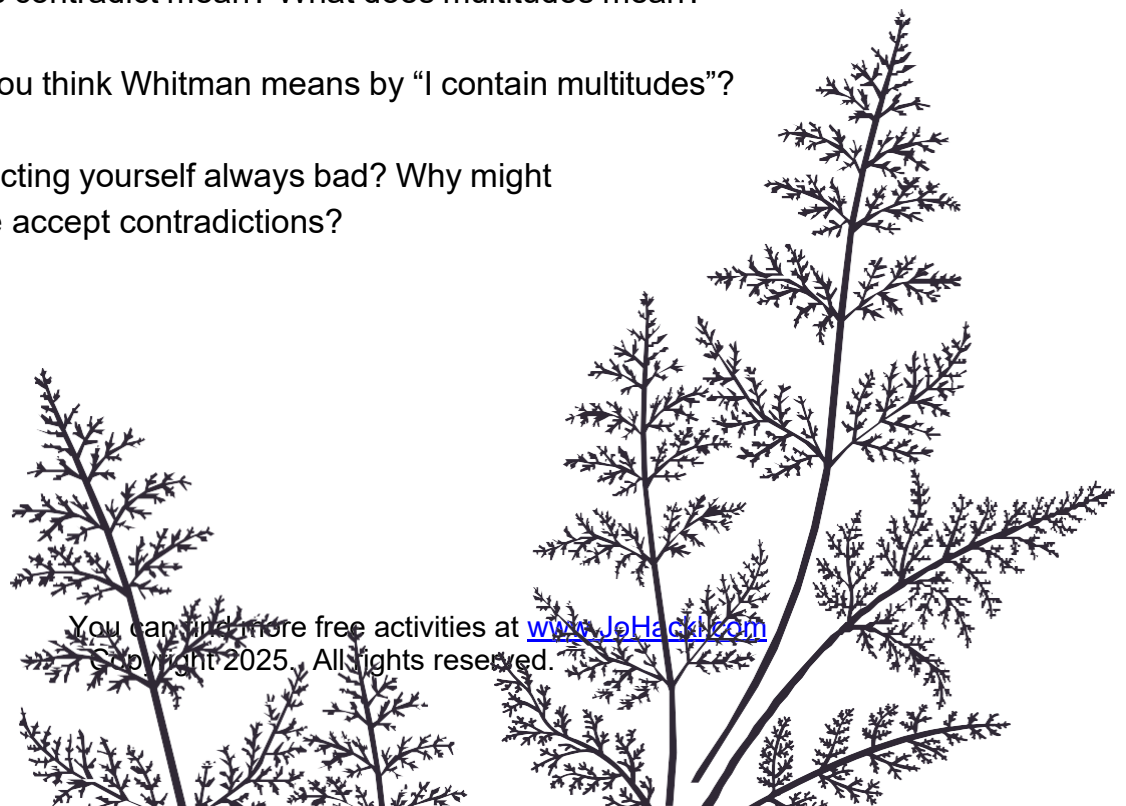
Your Mission:

Explore Whitman's language and use it to think and write about people (including yourself) in new ways.

STEP ONE: Read & Think

Read the excerpt of "Song of the Open Road" (Walt's Welcome) in *Poetry for Kids: Walt Whitman* by Karen Karbiener. Then:

- Rewrite each line in your own words.
- Share and discuss with a partner: What do you think "camerado" means? Why might Whitman have invented this word?
- What does contradict mean? What does multitudes mean?
- What do you think Whitman means by "I contain multitudes"?
- Is contradicting yourself always bad? Why might someone accept contradictions?



STEP TWO: Connect

Answer the following questions (in writing or as a group discussion) about the characters in *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*.

- Miss V says Cricket's mama is "more than what those neighbors think." How does Whitman's line apply to Cricket's mama?
- Does Miss V present this idea in a positive way? Why or why not?
- Could the line describe Cricket? Explain.
- Could the line describe you? Give an example of a contradiction or different "sides" you have.

STEP THREE: Create

Now it's your turn to use what you've learned about Whitman's style. Choose one of the projects below and express your own "multitudes" through poetry, art, or reflection.

- Write a short free-verse poem called "I Contain..." that lists different sides of one person (yourself, a family member, or a character). Use Whitman's idea, and don't worry about rhyme.
- Make a "Multitudes" poster showing 3 to 5 different qualities or contradictions of a person (words + images). Be creative by using color and short phrases.
- Write a short paragraph explaining why Percy might like Whitman's poem. Use examples from the book and from Whitman's lines.

Practicing with Poetry

Alliteration Walk

Alliteration is when words close together start with the same sound. Example: Peter's purple parrot perched perfectly.

- Walk around your classroom, schoolyard, or home.
- Find objects or scenes and create alliterative phrases (for example, whispering willow, bouncing blue ball).
- Collect your phrases and compile them into a group poem.

Repetition Relay

Repetition is when a word, phrase, or sound is repeated to make it stand out.

- Read the following lines from p. 67 in *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*:

*Me and Charlene, we sat and watched our fire. It swayed in orange, red, yellow,
and blue flames, like some kind of rainbow you'd dream up in your head.
Fire I'd started.
Fire I'd grown with my own two hands.*

- Write your own scene using repetition to show what is important to your character.
- Optional: Tap a steady beat while you write to help create rhythm.
- Revise for smooth flow and sound.

Playing with Rhythm

Rhythm is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in sentences. Writers use rhythm to make their writing feel tense, calm, exciting, or reflective.

- Short sentences = tension or urgency
- Long sentences = reflection or calm

Activity: Rewrite the scene in two ways:

1. Tense version: Use short, choppy sentences to create urgency.
2. Calm version: Use longer, flowing sentences to create reflection.

Afterward, share your versions with a partner or the class and discuss how sentence rhythm changes the feeling of the scene.

Peer Reflection Circles

- Share your draft with a small group.
- Use prompts like: “I noticed...”, “This made me feel...”
- Give and receive constructive feedback to improve your poem.

Poetry Polishing

- Read your poem aloud, listening for musicality and flow.
- Revise to enhance sensory details, rhythm, and figurative language.
- Example: “The wind whispered wishes across the clearing.”

Writing & Revision Stations•

Work through stations that focus on:

- Imagery – Make readers see, hear, smell, taste, or feel as though they are in the scene you are creating.
- Sound – Focus on rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, or repetition.
- Line Breaks – Decide where your lines start and end to create impact.
- Figurative Language – Use similes, metaphors, or personification to make your work vivid.

Rotate through each station, revising your poem to strengthen that element.

Common Core Alignments

Reading Literature:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2 / RL.5.2 / RL.6.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.4 / RL.5.4 / RL.6.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.5 / RL.5.5 / RL.6.5

Writing:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3 / W.5.3 / W.6.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.4 / W.5.4 / W.6.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.5 / W.5.5 / W.6.5

Speaking & Listening:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1 / SL.5.1 / SL.6.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.4 / SL.5.4 / SL.6.4

Language:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4.5 / L.5.5 / L.6.5