

Pantoums (Repetition)

For Grades Three Through Twelve

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The pantoum, a poetry form invented in Malaysia and brought west by the French poet Victor Hugo, will enable students to achieve astounding feats of repetition while letting their minds soar free wherever they will wander. If they learn this simple pattern, they will never be at a loss for how to begin or end a poem!

1. Share Lily Stoner's poem, bilingually if possible (a student may read Spanish if the instructor doesn't).
2. If time permits, tell a mature class about Delmira Agustini, whom Lily quotes for her line A. The first great woman poet of Uruguay, she lived a scandalous life, wrote very explicit love poetry, and was shot and killed by her husband because she wanted a divorce.
3. Ask for observations about the repetition. How many stanzas in the poem? How many lines in each stanza? How many total lines in the poem? If each line is repeated once, how many different lines in the poem?
4. If time permits, work through the pattern on the board, labeling lines 1 and 16 A, lines 2 and 5 B, etc. Students will help fill in the pattern. Hand out a worksheet with the pantoum form.
5. Ask what is the most important line in the poem (A, because it begins and ends the poem). It's also possible to do as Lily did and choose great first lines from beloved poems.
6. If time permits, compose a class pantoum on the board, accepting contributions from students.
7. Ask students to come up with their A line and write it in as both line 1 and line 16, checking with the instructor before going on.
8. Encourage students to write lines that are semi-independent units, as in Lily's poem, rather than a run-on narrative that will get fatally tangled by the pattern.
9. Students should compose a line, then fill it into its other slot as they go along. That way they know what's coming up. Some upcoming lines will be "sandwiched" between two already created lines and must fit somehow.
10. A pantoum can be created quickly. Soon students are writing the G and H lines, which complete (but do not end) the pantoum.
11. Read aloud.
12. Return to the pantoums in another session and revise them for clarity and originality.

Pantoum Form

A _____
B _____
C _____
D _____

B _____
E _____
D _____
F _____

E _____
G _____
F _____
H _____

G _____
C _____
H _____
A _____

Time and Materials: One or two fifty-minute sessions (if two sessions are available, work on Lily's poem and get as far as a class pantoum the first day, then write original pantoums the second day). A third session for revision is optional. A larger version of the pantoum form above, reproduced as a worksheet. Have available some vivid first lines from other poets, famous or not.