

## POETRY PAUSE: TELL IT AGAIN IN FLASHES

**Poem:** “Flame” by C. D. Wright

**Plan:** Students create an abbreviated copy-change of this poem, copying its structure but changing its content.

**Big Picture:** Concrete images are like landmarks in a reader’s journey through our stories. When we try reducing the story to just a series of noun phrases as the poet does in “Flame,” we find those landmarks in our own story. We can then emphasize and describe these landmarks well as we revise a narrative draft.

The master of linguistic mechanical engineering, Jeff Anderson, first introduced me to C. D. Wright’s poem, “Flame” in a guest post to my Go Poems blogging project. The poem is remarkable for its structure: three columns of noun phrases, each one article (the) + noun, and yet the poem seems to tell a story, albeit an unsolved mystery. Click the link below to read the whole poem first!

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51055/flame-56d22e8d6c815>

The poem begins with this line:

the breath                      the trees                      the bridge

I share that this poem always reminds me a bit of those movie trailers that start with a few flashes of intense imagery, each fading quickly to black. It gives you clues about the story without giving anything away. We talk a little about what they think this particular story is about, and then I ask students, “What do you notice about the structure?” The sparseness of words and the columns come up, but I keep saying “What else?” until we get to that student who says, “It’s all phrases.”

“Exactly!” I exclaim. “Not a single subject+verb combination in the whole poem! Just noun phrases, like subjects that never take action. So as readers, we get these flashes of images, lots of *things*, but we are left to conclude how they act or interact and what outcomes they suggest.”

I share a four-line copy-change poem I wrote about a story from my life - an unfortunate dairy disaster when I left two full glass bottles of milk in the trunk of my new car overnight on the coldest night of the year. The bottles froze quickly enough to crack but not quickly enough to congeal completely.

My students already knew this story, of course, because I was writing the personal narrative at the same time as they wrote theirs, so in this poem, unlike the far superior mentor text, they already understand how the noun phrases fit together in a story. I write a new one of these each year, depending on the story I am choosing to tell in my model narrative.

### The Meltdown

the glass	the ice	the pool
the tire	the pool	the eyes
the ice	the footsteps	the message
the heat	the milk	the dread

Then I say, “Now it’s your turn! Tell the story you’ve been telling in trios of noun phrases, and try to sustain that for at least four lines before you get to the end of the story. Find the flashes of images that tell the story without using any verbs. This gives you a guided tour through the most vital concrete images in your story and reminds you of what to emphasize.

Here is how high school freshman Sienna responded, telling the story of an especially memorable gift:

the holiday	the home	the gifts
the girl	the last	the elite
the box	the lid	the heart
the green	the joy	the thrill
the cloth	the textures	the meaning
the tears	the celebration	the embrace
	the jersey	
	the jersey	
	the jersey	

I tell students that when they write stories, they are leading readers through a world of their making. And often, in classrooms, that is the real world, as personal narratives dominate the landscape of assigned narrative writing. Concrete images are how we bring memories alive for others to share; they are the landmarks we build to define the landscape we have lived.

So as we go back to revising our narratives after this poetry pause, I tell students this: “When you come upon one of those objects that made it into your poem, stop and ask yourself, ‘Am I allowing the writer to slow down and see this detail? Or do I need to add some color, texture, or figurative language to make this stand out.’ When you stripped back your story to simply a series of noun phrases, these images made the cut. So they matter. Make sure your reader can truly experience them when they read your story.”

Need to streamline this poetry pause? Try using a think aloud, described in Streamline Strategy 2 in Appendix A of the book.