# Find Poetry: Using Found Poems in School and Public Libraries to Enhance Student Creativity and Writing

Janet Hilbun, PhD, University of North Texas

## Abstract

"Found poems" are a type of poetry "created by taking words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages from other sources and reframing them as poetry by making changes in spacing and lines, or by adding or deleting text, thus imparting new meaning" (*Wikipedia*). Almost anything can be used to create a found poem, and found poetry can be used in a variety of ways to enhance learning. By using primary sources or textbooks, students can use found poetry as a way to summarize, to analyze, to present facts, to organize information, to create new ideas, and to enhance classroom learning. Examples of ways to use this type of poetry in the classroom and library are provided. Use of found poetry will be linked to cognitive development and educational theory.

*A WEEK OF READING*

*The beginnings:*

*The moon was low in the sky, as bright and weightless as a lover's promise.*
*I'm a walker, not a runner . . .*
*The dogs were going to be a problem.*
*Reassured that it was worth what it cost to have it.*
*Folks don't understand unless it happens to them.*

*The endings:*

*I don't have a choice;*
*I started reading our true story out loud.*
*But I don't care because I'm so happy, I don't want to let go.*
*A moment of prayer settles them down.*
*And that was good.*
*And so am I.*

Found poems are a type of poetry "created by taking words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages from other sources and reframing them as poetry by making changes in spacing and lines, or by adding or deleting texts, thus impacting new meaning."[i] This definition, from *Wikipedia*, is both a simple yet complete description of this type of poem. Poets.org, the website of the Academy of American Poets, expands on this basic definition: "Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage, found poetry is often made from newspaper articles, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, or even other poems. A pure found poem consists exclusively of outside texts: the words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions. Decisions of form, such as where to break a line, are left to the poet."[ii]

Almost anything can be used to create a found poem—text from newspapers, magazines, or books; shelves: library, store, pantry; products in your grocery bag; items you find around the house; signs and billboards as you are travelling; graffiti; brand names. And there is no limit as to where poems can be found. (Note: All poems used in this paper are original efforts by the author of the paper.)

For example:

*BATHROOM SHELVES*

*One a day*
*All Natural, Heart Healthy*
*Eliminates odors*
*Daily Moisture.*

*Caress(ing)*
*Suave*

*Equate with Pert*
*Cool (mint)*

*An Edge.*

Found poems can be used in a variety of ways to enhance learning. By working with primary sources, literary works, or textbooks, students can use writing found poems as a way to summarize, analyze, present facts, organize information, create new ideas, and review for tests. Beyond these, found poems can support learning, improve reading skills, help with retention of factual information, and spark creativity. And sometimes they can be used for simply the joy of writing. Libraries, both school and public, provide a perfect venue for the introduction and writing of found poetry. With their abundance of print resources, and the knowledge and enthusiasm of librarians, libraries can provide a wealth of resources for writing as well as a forum for presenting the found poetry written by their patrons.

## A Brief History of Found Poetry

Little information is available about the history of found poetry, but perhaps the beginnings of this form of poetry can be found in the style of writing called "*Ekphrasis*," which is the practice of writing descriptively about works of art.[iii] This form of poetry began with the ancient Greeks and has continued through history in the works of poets such as Ovid, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Yeats, and others.

It is also closely related to "research poetry" in which a qualitative researcher "sorts out words, sentences, and passages" to synthesize meaning.[iv] Melissa Cahnmann points out that "developing a poetic voice prepares scholars to discover and communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways."[v] As to be expected, this form of disseminating research information is not without controversy.

Franz Stanzel points to the Dadaist movement in the visual arts as the predecessor of found poetry, with its use of found objects like coat racks and stovepipes presented as art.[vi] Manina Jones explains, "The resurgence of interest in Dada and the revival of Dadaesque techniques in artistic endeavors like Pop Art and Collage in the 1950s and 1960s was coincident with the popularizing of the found poem."[vii]

*Defining Dadaism*[viii]

*Not officially a movement,*
*It is artists **not** artists,*
*It is art **not** art*
*And this makes perfect sense.*

*But really*
*Dada was a literary and artistic movement, not form,*
*That began when the horrors of*
*WWI were being played out*

*On the front lawns of citizens.*
*Intellectuals, mostly French and German,*
*Congregated in Zurich*
*And undertook the time-honored tradition of*
*Protesting.*

*They were fed up*
*And their art became*
*Mild obscenities*
*Scatological humor*
*Visual puns*
*And everyday objects.*
*Shock art.*

*The public was outraged.*
*The Dadaists found this encouraging.*

*And the name?*
*"Dada" means "hobby horse" in French;*
*To others it is baby talk.*
*And this made sense to the intellectual artists.*

Found poetry is also closely related to the pop culture of the mid-1900s and to Pop Art in that both rely on found and everyday objects. Foss explains, "Found poets used the 'semantic fallout' of popular culture."[ix] In 1969 George Hitchcock published the first anthology of found poems, *Losers Weepers: Poems Found Practically Everywhere.* Two of the best known and most prolific found poets of the 1960s and 1970s were Bern Porter and Robert Colombo.

The first dictionary definitions for found poetry or found poems were included during the time period from about 1965–70 and were related to the term "found object." Early practitioners of what is now considered found poetry include James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot.

According to poets.org:

> Many poets have also chosen to incorporate snippets of found texts into larger poems, most significantly Ezra Pound. His *Cantos* includes letters written by presidents and popes, as well as an array of official documents from governments and banks. *The Waste Land*, by T. S. Eliot, uses many different texts, including Wagnerian opera, Shakespearian theater, and Greek mythology.[x]

Annie Dillard, essayist and Pulitzer Prize winner for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, published a book of found poems in 1995, *Mornings Like This: Found Poems*, featuring poetry derived from "an eclectic range of books."[xi]

## A Brief Overview of Learning Theory, Cognitive Development, and Found Poetry

Most educators, whether teachers or librarians, find it valuable to link any activity, especially those they deem as "fun" activities, to learning theory, educational objectives, and best practices. The writing of found poems can be linked to multiple learning theories to support their use in classrooms and library programming. Since most educators are familiar with these theories, only a brief description of them and their relationship to found poetry will be given.

## Louise Rosenblatt and Transactional Reading Relationships

In her essay "The Acid Test for Literature Teaching," Louise Rosenblatt points out that "for the readers, the literary work is a particular and personal event" and that "students must be helped to have personally satisfying and personally meaningful transactions with literature."[xii] Even more so: "Sensitivity to the different aspects of a literary work is highly desirable, of course, but when the eye of the reader is focused on the work as personally perceived, he will not march impartially through a set of items or apply again and again a single type of analysis. He will be aglow with a particular response. He will need to register this response, to get the particular quality of it. And he will need to reflect on it. For it will be the result of the way the work fits into his own past experience of books and life."[xiii] And this is what found poetry can be about— allowing a student to interact with a text on a personal level and to make sense of the text.

## Reader Response Theory

Both of the above quotes by Rosenblatt also relate to Reader Response theory, and Rosenblatt is credited with "the paradigm shift in the teaching of literature away from viewing the text as authority to a view that focuses on the readers' relationship to the text."[xiv] Reader Response theory is closely related to Constructivist learning theory, and writing a found poem is another way of responding to literature that emphasizes the reader's relationship to the text.

## Constructivism

Constructivist theory defines learning as an "active, constructive process" in which "people actively construct or create their own subjective representation of objective reality."[xv] Since new information is linked to prior knowledge, mental representations are subjective. Important contributors to constructivism include Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Jerome Bruner. Constructivism is closely related to Instructional Design, Problem-Based Learning, Cognitive Apprenticeship or Scaffolding, and Carol Kuhlthau's Information Search Process and Guided Inquiry. Writing found poetry helps students construct meaning from curriculum by using class lectures, textbooks, research, novels, and primary sources to present information in new and meaningful ways.

## Experiential Learning

While David Kolb is generally accredited with popularizing it, Experiential Learning has its beginnings with John Dewey and Carl Rogers. Often called "learning through experience" and "learning by doing," a key element of this theory is that learning takes place when the student is involved in the process. By involving students in direct experiences related to "real world problems," the librarian or teacher becomes a facilitator in the learning process.[xvi] These learning

experiences should include reflection, analysis, and synthesis, all of which can be accomplish by writing found poems.

**Bloom's Taxonomy**

While not actually a theory, most compilations of educational theory include Bloom's taxonomy of learning. In 1956 Bloom led a group of educational psychologists in the development of a classification of levels of intellectual behavior important in learning. This taxonomy included, starting at the most basic level: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In the 1990s a new group of cognitive psychologists updated this theory for the twenty-first century and changed the taxonomy from nouns to verbs. The new taxonomy includes remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating.[xvii] Using found poetry in the classroom or as a creative activity uses the highest levels of the taxonomy, especially the highest level: creating.

**Higher Order Thinking Skills**

While based on the work of most educational psychologists, the concept of higher order thinking skills is most often linked to Bloom and his taxonomy. Using found poetry as an instructional strategy not only helps with these higher-order thinking skills but also with the lower-level skills of remembering—which includes defining, duplicating, listing, recalling, repeating, reproducing, and stating—and of understanding, which includes classifying, describing, discussing, explaining, identifying, reporting, selecting, translating, and paraphrasing. Found poems can also be used to apply information, the third stop on the pyramid.

## Beyond Educational Theory

Going beyond educational theory and practice, generalizations can be made about the effectiveness of using found poetry as a classroom tool:

1. Writing found poetry encourages critical thinking and creativity. Since the poet must weigh words and evaluate their meaning in context and form, found poetry requires the writer to synthesize the meaning of the primary source in such a way that word and phrase placement provides emphasis and clarification.[xviii]
2. Found poetry increases connections to content. The expository writing found in most textbooks requires readers to be able to identify key terms and academic vocabulary. The clarifying nature of found poetry lends itself well to the development of these skills.[xix] It also reinforces the skills of interpretation and comprehension as choices must be made about words and phrases from the original source.
3. Found poetry can lead to lasting connections with the subject matter. When students "make words their own," they also create a connection to the text.[xx] This text no longer becomes something just to memorize for a test.
4. Found poetry expands and deepens student engagement with language as it is done in collaboration with text.
5. Found poetry can lead to improved comprehension and increased academic language acquisition. Because students who construct found poems are encouraged to examine and

reflect on the language of the author, the borrowing of text leads to a form of scaffolding. Writing about a specific subject matter positively affects learning and serves as a "gateway" to comprehension.[xxi]

6. Writing found poetry in content classrooms helps students become more attentive to the language found in text materials and the process of writing a found poem allows the student to access information in ways that make the information uniquely their own.[xxii]

Cognitive development closely relates to learning theory in that developmentally humans are able to master certain tasks and understandings at different stages usually related to their age. This idea closely relates to constructivism in that activities need to be appropriate for the age and maturity of the students. Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" is often used as a standard for understanding the concept of cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development "is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers."[xxiii] Using found poems as a basis for problem solving and developing skills uniquely supports cognitive development.

Other psychologists such as Piaget and Bruner have their own theories of the stages of cognitive development, but most focus on the concept that students need to be physically, mentally, and emotionally ready to accomplish certain goals and tasks successfully; however, this is not accomplished independently but with the help of peers, parents, and teachers.

*A Summary of Found Poetry and Learning*

*A student needs to:*
*Transact*
*Construct*
*Experience*
*and Bloom*

*With the help of a "teacher" who*
*Designs instruction*
*Institutes problem based learning*
*Scaffolds*
*and guides inquiry and the research process*

*Found poetry can help create learning.*

## How to Write a Found Poem

By thinking of found poems as literary collages, writing becomes simple. Unlike many other poetic forms, there are no rules as to rhyme, rhythm, or structure. Basically, the writer uses someone else's words to create a new structure, in this case a poem.

The writer gathers interesting, appealing, or important words from another source, and the list of sources never ends. Anything that has words or that can be named with words is fair game for a found poem. When working with a classroom or other group of children or young adults, start with familiar items—the arrangements of books on a library shelf, the playlist on their electronic device, the contents of their purses or backpacks, the student handbook, their horoscope—and have them arrange this into a poem. Once you are comfortable with the concept, you can use it as a way to connect students with curriculum. A good description of introducing found poems as part of a classroom lesson can be found at http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/printouts/foundpoem.pdf; the sponsor of the web page, the NCTE—National Council of Teachers of English—and author Patricia Schulze have made it available for download and use.[xxiv]

## Copyright Issues

Copyright can cause issues if found poems are published. For the most part, this can be avoided by citing the source at the beginning or the end of the poem. The type of found poem being published also impacts copyright. If the poem takes phrases or sentences from a variety of sources, no real issue exists. A poem that uses one single copyrighted text proves to be a different issue as questions of fair use come into play. Legally, though, no law exists that deals with found poems and copyright. Authors often see this as an issue of plagiarism, but poets see it more as a form of creativity. If publishing student poems either online or in print, the recommendation stands: cite the source from which the poem originated. For more information, see "Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Poetry"[xxv] developed jointly by the Program on Information Justice and Intellectual Property at Washington College of Law, American University, the Center for Media and Social Impact at American University, the Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute, and the Poetry Foundation.[xxvi]

*Found Poetry—A List of What I Read and What I Used in Writing This Paper*

*Words mostly*
*Book titles*
*Favorite quotes*
*Advertisements*
*Conversations—perhaps those overheard*
*Text messages*
*Research*
*Websites*
*Interviews*
*A dissertation and a thesis*
*Wikipedia*
*Database articles*
*And whatever words made me think.*

## Suggestions for the Use of Found Poems in the Classroom or Library

The list of possibilities for using found poetry is extensive; an Internet search or a database search will show many ways to integrate it into a classroom or learning situation. While a number of these uses are presented below, the suggestions are not exhaustive and should only serve as ideas to get started with the process.

## General Uses

The NCTE website gives a complete lesson plan developed by Carolyn Wilhelm with reproducibles for use with younger students kindergarten thru third grade (ages 5–9) that could be easily adapted for older students.[xxvii] This activity works equally well in the classroom or as a library activity. In public libraries, this could be incorporated into Summer Reading programming with kids writing found poetry from a book they have read.

Jennifer Isgitt of Fort Worth, Texas, has a blog, *The Empathetic Teacher*, for high school educators. Her structured approach to writing found poems provides instructions for introducing found poetry into a classroom. In her example, she uses a magazine article to as a starting place.[xxviii] Again, this approach to writing found poems would work well beyond any classroom and could be used to show children and young adults how to find keywords and important information from primary and secondary sources and how to use found poetry as a note-taking tool. Public librarians could use this with their programming for the home-schooling population.

## Social Studies and History

The U.S. Library of Congress resource kit on using primary sources has one section devoted to found poetry. It states:

> Retelling history from one's own perspective can help them (students) make the learning their own. While there are many ways that students can "retell" history, one effective strategy is the writing of "found" poetry. Using rich primary sources texts, students select words that allow them to retell the historical content in poetic form.[xxix]

Public libraries with historical document sections are a perfect venue for using found poetry to "retell" history. Another activity could involve interviewing people about a historical event or period and presenting the interviews as found poetry. This could develop into a multi-generation programming activity in almost any type of library (Grandparents' Day is the first holiday that comes to mind).

In an article in the *Geography Teacher*, Ellen Foster outlines a lesson using a geography connection with high school students. The lesson involves reading an article and dividing students into groups to write found poems using the article.[xxx] In a library setting, as either a library lesson or a programming activity, atlases, state or country books, cookbooks, or newspapers from different cities or parts of the country could be substituted.

## English and Language Arts (Adaptable to Any Language, of Course)

Barbara Groome and Jo Peterson Gibbs provide a lesson plan for using picture books for writing found poetry that includes educational objectives. While they structure this as a group project, it could easily be adapted for individual writing. It is also appropriate for a library setting and would be a good way to introduce found poetry or to just have fun with picture books and poetry. For public libraries, this would be an inexpensive but fun parent-and-child activity for library programming during Poetry Month in April.[xxxi]

An older article by Don Phillips in the *English Journal*, "Let Found Poetry Help Your Students Study Literature," illustrates several ways that he used found poetry as part of several different lessons and shows the versatility of the format.[xxxii] He used found poems as both a culminating activity and as a review of learning. His ideas are easily adaptable as a book club activity as a way to discuss a book or as a culminating activity after the book has been read and discussed. It can also be used as a note-taking tool to highlight "beautiful language" or important events.

Another article from 1989 in the *English Journal*, "Let Found Poetry Help Your Student Find Poetry" by Nancy Gorrell, explains how she used found poetry to introduce her poetry unit and divided the process into three lessons.[xxxiii] While the unit as introduced in this article may not be as applicable to a library setting, it can be shared with teachers, used as a resource, and it would also work with homeschooler programming.

**Science and Math**

*Fine Lines*, a blog by Christie—no last name given—discusses a found poetry project that she did with discarded science textbooks. The science poems in "Found Poetry Becomes Art" are fascinating, and this activity could work with any print source .[xxxiv] This would be a good activity to use with weeded math, science, and computer books that would allow students to cut out the words they want to use.

There is also beginning to be some interest in combining poetry and science in STEM and STEAM programming. One school district that has done this successfully gives some good ideas as to how this can be accomplished in "Combining Robotics with Poetry?: Art and Engineering Can Co-Exist."[xxxv] With so many libraries, both school and public, doing STEM and STEAM programming, this short article gives some rationale for combining poetry with science as well as some basic ideas that could easily be expanded to many topics.

## A Few Concluding Words

*Found poems are a type of poetry*
*"created by taking words, phrases,*
*and sometimes whole passages from other sources*
*and reframing them as poetry*
*by making changes in spacing and lines,*
*or by adding or deleting texts,*
*thus impacting new meaning."*

*Almost anything can be used to create a found poem*

*JRLYA: Volume 6: November 2015*

*—text from newspapers, magazines, or books; shelves*
*—library, store, pantry; products in your grocery bag; items you find around the house*
*—signs and billboards as you are travelling;*
*—graffiti;*
*—brand names*
*—and there is no limit as to where poems can be found.*


*Found poems can be used in a variety of ways to enhance learning.*
*And sometimes they can be used for simply the joy of writing.*


## Notes

[1] "Found Poetry," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Found_poetry (accessed March 24, 2015).

[ii] "Found Poetry," Poets.org, https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-found-poem (accessed October 20, 2015).

[3] Monica Prendergast, "Found Poetry as Literature Review: Research Poems on Audience and Performance," *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 (February 2006): 369–89.

[iv] Ibid., 370.

[v] Ibid., 371, quoting from Melissa Cahnmann, "The Craft, Practice, and Possibility in Poetry in Educational Research," *Educational Research* 32 (3): 29.

[vi] Manina Jones, "Redeeming Prose: Colombo's Found Poetry," *Canadian Poetry Journal* 25 (1989), http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/cpjrn/vol25/jones.htm (accessed August 24, 2014), quoting from Franz K. Stanzel, "Texts Recycle: 'Found Poems' Found in Canada," in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*, ed. Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985), 91.

[vii] Jones, "Redeeming Prose."

[viii] From http://arthistory.about.com/cs/arthistory10one/a/dada.htm (accessed October 23, 2015).

[ix] Lisa Patrick, "Found Poetry: A Tool for Supporting Novice Poets and Fostering Transactional Relationships between Prospective Teachers and Young Adult Literature" (PhD diss., Columbus, Ohio State University, 2013), 32, quoting Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2009).

[x] "Poetic form: Found poems," Poets.org, http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-found-poem (accessed March 24, 2015).

[xi] Patrick, "Found Poetry," 321.

[xii] Louise Rosenblatt, "The Acid Test for Literature Teaching," *English Journal* 21, no. 4 (1956): 69.

[xiii] Ibid., 63.

[xiv] Gladys Westbrook Church, "The Significance of Louise Rosenblatt on the Field of Teaching Literature," *Inquiry* 1 (Spring 1997): 7.

[xv] "Constructivism," Learning-Theories.Com, http://www.learning.theories.com/constructivism.html (accessed August 22, 2014).

[xvi] "Experiential Learning," Northern Illinois University, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, http://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/guide/strategies/experiential_learning.pdf (accessed August 22, 2014).

[xvii] Richard C. Overbaugh and Lynn Schultz, "Bloom's Taxonomy," http://ww2.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm (accessed August 22, 2014).

[xviii] Julia Dangerfield Lewis, "Finders Keepers: Using Found Poetry to Promote Academic Literacy and a Deeper Understanding across the Curriculum: A Multi-Grade Curriculum" (MA thesis, Sacramento, California State University, 2012), 19.

[xix] Ibid., 20.

[xx] Ibid., 23.

[xxi] Ibid., 31.

[xxii] Ibid., 33.

[xxiii] Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 86.

[xxiv] Patricia Schulze, "Lesson Plan: Found Poems/Parallel Poems," NCTE, http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/found-poems-parallel-poems-33.html (accessed June 28, 2015).

[xxv] "Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Poetry," http://www.cmsimpact.org/fair-use/best-practices/code-best-practices-fair-use-poetry (accessed October 24, 2015).

[xxvi] Patricia Aufderheide, Katherine Coles, Peter Jaszi, and Jennifer Urban, *Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Poetry*, 2009, http://www.cmsimpact.org/sites/default/files/documents/pages/fairusepoetrybooklet_singlepg_3.pdf (accessed March 22, 2015).

[xxvii] Carolyn Wilhelm, "Lesson Plan: A Bear of a Poem: Composing and Performing Found Poetry," http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/bear-poem-composing-performing-835.html (accessed June 28, 2015).

[xxviii] Jennifer Isgitt, "Found and Headline Poems," https://secure.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/Sample/18488chap1.pdf (accessed June 28, 2015).

[xxix] "Found Poetry," Library of Congress: Teaching with Primary Sources, http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/poetry/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf (accessed March 22, 2015).

[xxx] Ellen Foster, "Finding Geography Using Found Poetry," *Geography Teacher* 9 (January 2012): 26–29.

[xxxi] Barbara Groome and Jo Peterson Gibbs, "Creating Found Poetry from Picture Books," Educational Oasis, http://www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/LP/LA/creating_found_poetry.htm. An extension of this activity can be found at http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/3675 (accessed March 25, 2015).

[xxxii] Don Phillips, "Let Found Poetry Help Your Students Study Literature," *English Journal* 78 (May 1989): 68–70.

[xxxiii] Nancy Gorrell, "Let Found Poetry Help Your Students Find Poetry," *English Journal* 78 (February 1989): 30–34.

[xxxiv] Christie, "Found Poetry Becomes Art," *Fine Lines*,  (accessed March 24, 2014).

[xxxv] Mindshift, "Combining Robotics with Poetry?: Art and Engineering Can Co-Exist," http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2013/04/04/combining-robotics-with-poetry-art-and-engineering-can-co-exist/ (accessed June 28, 2015).