

Oakland Unified School District ♦ Process Writing Assessment
8th Grade Response to Literature:
“How I Started Writing Poetry” by Reginald Lockett

Introduction

Much of the writing we do in school requires us to read and respond to a reading selection. If the reading is good, we can relate to it even when the subject and characters come from a different place or a different time. This assignment asks you to carefully read a piece of nonfiction and then write an essay about an important idea or theme from the reading. Your essay needs to include a thesis statement where you **make a claim about an important idea or theme** you think the author is trying to communicate. It is also important to **support your thesis with details and evidence from the reading selection**.

The selection you will read is called “How I Started Writing Poetry” by Reginald Lockett. In this story, we follow a character through events that took place when he was about 14.

Getting Started

Think about the title of the story you will read “How I Started Writing Poetry.” With a partner or as a whole class, discuss these four questions:

1. Have you ever written poetry? Do you write poetry now?
2. Do you think writing poetry takes a special talent?
3. What does writing poetry do for you? (How might it help you?)
4. What are some reasons people might write poetry?

Vocabulary

You’ll appreciate Lockett’s story more if you review the meanings of these words before you begin. Match the words on the right to their synonyms on the left. The first three words are adjectives; the last two are nouns.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| 1. _____ despicable | a. advanced in intelligence or development |
| 2. _____ vulgar | b. false appearance |
| 3. _____ precocious | c. shamefully bad |
| 4. _____ façade | d. false courage |
| 5. _____ bravado | e. crude |

Reading

Next, your teacher will read the following selection by Reginald Lockett. Listen and read along silently. After your teacher has read the story aloud, please re-read the story by yourself. As you read the story a second time, think about a *theme*, or important idea about life, that you think the author wants to communicate. Underline words and phrases in the story that show the theme you think the author is trying to communicate.

How I Started Writing Poetry

by Reginald Lockett



At the age of fourteen I was “going for bad.” That is, I had cultivated a façade of daring-do, hip, cool, con man bravado so prevalent among adolescent males in West Oakland. I “talked that talk and walked that walk” most parents found downright despicable. All I wanted to do was project that image of being forever cool like Billy Boo, who used to wear three T-shirts, two slipover sweaters and a thick Pendleton shirt tucked neatly in his khaki or black Den Davidsons to give everybody the impression that he was buffed (muscle bound) and definitely not to be messed with. Cool. Real Cool.

Herbert Hoover Junior High, the school I attended, was considered one of three toughest in Oakland at that time. It was a dirty, gray, forbidding looking place where several fights would break out every day. During my seventh-grade year, there were constant referrals to the principal’s office for any number of infractions committed either in Miss Okamura’s third-period music class or Mrs. George’s sixth-period math class in the basement where those of us with behavioral problems were sent.

Though my behavior left a lot to be desired, I managed to earn some fairly decent grades. I loved history, art and English, and somehow managed to work my way up from special education classes to college prep courses by the time I reached ninth grade, my last year at Hoover. But by then I had become a full-fledged little thug, and had been suspended quite a few times for going to knuckle city at the drop of a hat for any real or imagined reason.

Probably through pressure from my parents and encouragement from my teachers and counselors, I forced myself to start thinking about pursuing a career after graduation from high school, which was three years away. I decided I wanted to become a physician, since doctors were held in such high esteem. I’d gotten it in my head that I wanted to be a plastic surgeon, no less, because I liked working with my hands and found science intriguing. Then something strange happened. Just as I was grooving, really getting into this fantastic project in fourth-period art class, I was called up to the teacher’s desk and handed a note and told to report to a classroom downstairs on the first floor. What had I done this time?

When I entered the classroom, there sat this tall gangly, goofy-looking white woman who wore her hair unusually long for that time, had thick glasses and buckteeth like the beaver on the Ipana Toothpaste commercials. Some of the roughest, toughest kids that went to Hoover were in there -- especially big, old, mean, ugly Martha Dupree who was known to knock out boys, girls and teachers when she got the urge.

When Miss Nettelbeck finally got our attention, she announced that this was a creative writing class that would meet twice a week. Creative writing? *What the hell is creative writing?* a couple of us asked. She explained that it was a way to express what was on your mind, and a better way of getting something off of your chest instead of beating up your fellow students. Then she read a few poems to us and passed out some of that coarse school-issue lined paper and told us to write about something we liked, disliked, or really wanted. What I wanted to know was, did it have to be one of ‘them poems.’ “If that’s how you want to express yourself, Reginald,” she said. So I started racking my brain, trying to think about what I liked, didn’t like, and what I really wanted. Well, I liked football, track and Gayle Johnson, who would turn her cute little nose up in total disgust every time I tried to say something to her.

One thing I really liked was the ocean. I guess that was in my blood because my father was then a Master Chief Steward in the Navy, and, when I was younger, he would take me aboard ships docked at Hunter’s Point and Alameda. I loved the sea so much that I would sometimes walk from my house on Market and West MacArthur all the way to the Berkeley Pier or take a bus to Ocean Beach in San Francisco whenever I wasn’t up to no good. So I wrote:

I sit on a rock
watching
the evening tide
come in.
The green waves travel
with the wind.
They seem to carry
a message of
warning, of plea
from the dimensions
of time and distance.

When I gave it to Miss Nettelbeck, she read it and told me it was good for a first attempt at writing poetry, and since there was still some time left in the period, I should go back to my seat and write something else. Damn! These teachers never gave you any kind of slack, no matter what you did and how well you did it. Now, what else could I think of to write about? How about something vulgar and violent to shock her? How about a tribute to Miss Bobby, the neighborhood drag queen? So I wrote a poem about Miss Bobby.

When Miss Nettelbeck read that one, I just knew she would immediately write a referral and have me sent back upstairs. But she liked it and said I was precocious for someone at such an innocent age. Innocent! When was I ever innocent? I was guilty of just about everything I was accused of doing. Like, get your eyes checked, baby. And what was precocious? Was it something weird? I asked her what she meant and she told me it meant that I knew about things somebody my age didn’t usually know about. While I believe I was right about not being innocent, she was right about me being precocious. I did know things that somebody my age didn’t usually know. That could only mean that I was “hip to the lip.” But I already knew that.

I also knew that one day, I would choose a future from a grab bag of professional choices, but *poet* wasn’t what I expected to select. I did not expect to enjoy writing that first day in Miss Nettelbeck’s class, and I did not expect to be good at it, but now as a writer and a poet, I know my career started there.

Shortly after this, I wasn’t running up and down the streets with the fellas much anymore. Harvey would get bent out of shape every time I’d tell him I had something else to do. This also bothered my mother because she kept telling me I was going to ruin my eyes if I didn’t stop reading so much; and what was it that I spent all

my spare time writing in a manila notebook? Was I keeping a diary or something? Even getting good grades in citizenship and making honor roll didn't keep her off my case. But I kept right on reading and writing, looking forward to Miss Nettelbeck's class twice a week. I stopped fighting, too. I was reading books by just about every poet and writer Miss Nettelbeck read to the class. That's how I started writing poetry.

Thinking, Talking and Planning

1. What do you think is the most memorable part of the story?

2. In writing this story about Reginald Lockett's experiences, what do you think the narrator/author is trying to say about life? What do you think is an important idea or theme of the story? *A theme is an idea or insight about life that is revealed in a story.* Write your idea below:

3. Discuss your idea with a partner. Your partner may have a different idea than you. Write your partner's idea below:

4. Now, your teacher will conduct a conversation with the whole class. As you listen to your classmates' ideas about the theme of the story, please write them in the space below.

5. Which theme is most interesting to you? Select a theme and write it on the lines below:

6. Next, you will look for evidence in the text that supports the theme you have chosen to write about. Evidence can be:
- a paraphrase of what happened in the story
 - a direct quotation from the story
 - a comparison to your own experience or the experience of someone else.

NOTE: For a stronger essay, **MOST** of the evidence should be from the text. Skim over the story again and select **three** lines or passages that support the theme you have chosen to write about.

Thesis Statement: This is your interpretation of the theme of the story.

Text evidence: quotation/excerpt from the story	Commentary: explain how the evidence supports the theme
<p><i>Example:</i> <i>“She explained it was a way to express what was on your mind, and a better way of getting something off of your chest instead of beating up your fellow students.”</i></p>	<p>Miss Nettelbeck was a teacher who believed in the power of words. Although the students in her poetry class were selected because of their delinquent behavior, she treated them as young writers and projected the belief that their powerful feelings needed an outlet other than physical violence. She believed writing could change their behavior.</p>
1.	
2.	
3.	
Evidence: Your own life experience (or that of someone you know)	Commentary: Explain how this supports the theme
4.	

Writing

Here's the prompt:

Response to "How I Started Writing Poetry"

Teachers in Oakland want to know how 8th grade students interpret the important ideas in Reginald Lockett's story. Write an essay in response to the story "How I Started Writing Poetry." Choose a theme (important idea) that the writer communicates through the events of the story or the feelings of the character, and explain how the story illustrates this theme.

Support your thesis through quotations from the reading selection, paraphrases of passages from the reading selection, and personal experiences that connect to the theme of the story. Use your notes from any of the previous sections to develop and support the ideas in your essay.

Writing Reminders:

As you write, keep the following points in mind since you won't have time to rewrite.

- ___ Begin in an interesting way that leads to the thesis of your essay.
- ___ In your introductory paragraph, include a formal introduction to the story and author.
- ___ Support your thesis by including specific references to the reading selection (quotations, paraphrased passages, etc.) and personal experience.
- ___ Use language and vocabulary that is precise and lively.
- ___ Organize the main sections of your essay into paragraphs so that the reader can follow your ideas.
- ___ End with a confident conclusion that restates your thesis.

After You Write (Editing)

After you write, take time to review the items below. You may make changes right on your paper.

- ___ Give the essay a title (you can choose your title before or after you write your essay).
- ___ Check your punctuation. Use capital letters, commas, periods, quotation marks where they belong.
- ___ Check your spelling.