

Editing Emily's Way: An Exercise in Diction and Its Implications

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For grades 9-12, in literature classes, writing classes and creative writing classes

In this series of lessons, students will examine the poetry of Emily Dickinson and explore the diction of poetry: how words change not only meaning, but tone and style. They will experience the differences made by word choice, and propose reasons for editorial choices made in Dickinson's work. In classrooms where students compose their own poetry, students can also repeat the experimentation with their poetry, and dialogue with fellow writers about what would be the best word choices for their poetry, and why.

This unit addresses the following NCTE standards for language arts:

- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts.
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes
- Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

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Essential questions / understandings:

- How does one find "le mot juste" (the exact word) in writing poetry?
- What are the implications of the words chosen (and of those omitted)?

Knowing that poets use words sparingly, thereby heightening the significance and impact of each word, the enduring understandings to acquire are:

- the principles by which the writer chooses words for poetry;
- how the lexicon chosen influences the nuances of the poem, determining tone, cadence, voice and ultimately meaning.

Assessment evidence

Formative:

- class discussion
- small group discussion
- pair work

Summative:

- reflective journaling on Dickinson's poetry
- reflective journaling on another student's poetry
- reflective journaling and revision of personal poetry

Lesson Plan / Learning activity. Steps 1-4 can take ~3 days; steps 4-8, ~ another 3 days, depending on the size of the class.

1. As a class, students will read "Safe in their alabaster chambers" (Fr 124), along with the letters between Emily and Susan Dickinson regarding the poem (letter # 238, from Johnson, pp. 161-162). They will consider which final choices were made by Dickinson, and theorize: were Dickinson's choices based on alliteration? cadence? tonality? precision of meaning? mood? Reflect as a group: how do different choices change the poem's meaning? feeling? reading?
2. The class will be then divided into small groups (3-4 students). Copies of Dickinson's poems (five examples listed below) with all variants will be distributed (teacher will have retyped poems so final choices are not indicated).

Fr 772 ("Essential Oils – are wrung")
Fr 353 "I'm ceded – I've stopped being Their's [*sic*]"
Fr 1469 "A Chilly Peace infests the Grass"
Fr 401 "Dare you see a Soul at the 'White Heat'?"
Fr 598 "The Brain – is wider than the Sky"

NOTE: The edition that shows all variants is the three-volume *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1998).

Students will indicate which choices they prefer, coming to a consensus with explanation as to why they made the choices they do. One method is for the teacher to put the poems and variants on transparencies. Students can then

indicate their choices with erasable markers, and later display them (step 3) to the class. The groups will then receive “final version” to compare with the choices they made (again, if put on transparencies, the entire class can then compare the choices).

3. Students will then journal reflectively about Dickinson’s or the editor’s choices, reconsidering the questions from step one.
4. They will then share these observations, first in their small group and then to the whole class.
5. Students will now retrieve 1-3 of their original (preferably unrhymed) poems, from an earlier creative writing assignment, which have not been shared in the class. Working individually, they will rewrite at least 5 words in the poem, providing at least 4 feasible choices for each word chosen. Only 1 variant may be a synonym. They will then reformat their poem so that their “final choices” are not apparent. (Thesauruses are very helpful here! If students have laptops, insist they go to on-line thesauruses, not just the few words available through formatting tools.)
6. Students will then exchange poems with a partner. Each student will then repeat steps 2 and 3 individually, using their classmates’ poems to consider choices, and reflect upon the reasons for these choices.
7. Students will then reconvene with their partners to explain the “editor’s” choices, recalling the questions raised in step 1, or any other reason for a suggested change. The “poet” will then reveal his / her original choices.
8. Finally, the poets will write reflectively about the choices their editors have suggested. Would the poet now choose differently? Why or why not?

Materials

- overheads, or copies of Dickinson poems, with variations
- source for Dickinson poem variations
- “final” copies of Dickinson poems
- Franklin, R.W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. By Emily Dickinson. Cambridge: Belknap, 1999.
- Franklin, R.W., ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. By Emily Dickinson. Cambridge: Belknap, 1998.
- Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*. Cambridge: Belknap, 1986.
- thesauruses

Comments / reflections

My students were fascinated with the variations in Dickinson's poems, and argued passionately about what should be the "correct" version, particularly in light of the fact that sometimes, no one really knows! Why should theirs not be considered correct? They really felt the difference that a couple of word changes make, and returned to their (re)writing with renewed energy and understanding. Thesauruses are a great help in exploring word choices, and some great discussions ensued about connotations and nuances. This is a good exercise for vocabulary development and precision in meaning, as well as for deepening appreciation and respect for Dickinson and poets as wordsmiths in general.