

How Writers Write Poetry 2015

CLASS TWO • Discussion Topics

How to use these questions:

These discussion questions are based on the video and required reading for each class. You can use them to lead a discussion with your group, or you can use them to think about the class videos and readings on your own. You do not have to use them in the order given below, and you do not have to use all of them. Onward!

Class 2 Questions for Beginning Writers

Choose one or more of the options below to discuss with your group:

From Mary Jo Bang's talk:

Mary Jo Bang discusses the fast momentum of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (a link to this poem can be found in the Class Two Readings document). Read the first few lines of "Howl," and consider Ginsberg's use of sound and diction (diction = choice of words especially with regard to correctness, clearness, or effectiveness). How do these first few lines put the sounds of words together to propel the reader forward, to immerse the reader into the experience of the poem? How does diction work with these words' sounds to set the pace of the poem? As a reader, how does the poem affect you?

Optional discussion activity: Have each person in your group read the first 8 lines of "Howl" (a link to this poem can be found in the Class Two Readings document). Discuss how each person chose to work with the diction and rhythm while reading the poem. Did each person put emphasis on different words or phrases? Why did each person choose emphasis for specific words or phrases as opposed to other words or phrases?

From Carol Light's talk:

Carol Light discusses her method of beginning a poem by making a list of words and forming sonic (sound-based) associations between the words. Does this method appeal to you? If you were to write a list and read it out loud to yourself before you began to turn it into a poem, do you think the sonic associations would help you form the poem, or do you think they would interfere with your process of creating meaning from these words?

From Carl Phillips's talk:

Carl Phillips suggests that perhaps poets should try to write in lines and stanzas of non-uniform lengths, using the different lengths of the lines as an expressive element. How do you view the line and the stanza? Can you think of scenarios in which you might want to use uniform-length lines? Can you think of examples of when you might want to break from that uniformity?



Optional assignment preparation question for beginning writers:

The Class 2 Assignment for Beginning Writers asks you to think of an interesting word or phrase, use it to create a word cloud, and then use that word cloud to create a poem. To prepare for this assignment, think about what makes a phrase interesting. The example Carol Light gave is “Ambition bit her.” Journalism uses the phrase “man bites dog” to explain the difference between an everyday event (if a dog bites a man, that is not unusual) and a newsworthy event (if a man bites a dog, that is very unusual). You probably would not be surprised to hear that a dog bit a man, but no one expects to hear that a man bit a dog. The phrase “ambition bit her” is interesting because it is unexpected. How might you change the way you normally use language to come up with an unexpected and compelling phrase for your word cloud?

Class 2 Questions for Experienced Writers

Choose one or more of the options below to discuss with your group:

From Mary Jo Bang’s talk:

Mary Jo Bang talks about the quick and insistent momentum of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (a link to this poem can be found in the Class Two Readings document). She characterizes his use of sound in the poem as sounds which refuse to stop. How might we employ such a fast paced, runaway momentum while still using poetic speech? How can sound effects like rhyme and alliteration make meaning in the poem while the reader is rapidly swept along? For instance, a reader of such a fast-paced poem might not have time to slow down and consider what they’re reading if they want to keep up with the momentum. So as poets, how can we use sound to both propel us forward and to make our words meaningful for readers? How can sounds have expression, even with in a pattern of speech that has an insistent momentum?

From Carol Light’s talk:

Consider Carol Light’s talk in relation to Carl Phillips’s talk from Class 1. Light talks about sound in poetry, and Phillips talks about the relationship between form and content. As you write, how can your use of sound determine how you structure your work’s form and select its content, and how can decisions about form and content drive your use of sound? Look back at Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (a link to this poem can be found in the Class Two Readings document) and/or look at the poem by Rita Dove that Phillips read in his talk. In each of these poems, how is sound working as both structural element in these poems and a meaning-making element? What can sonic effects like repetition, rhyme, and alliteration do to unite a poem’s form and its meaning?

From Carl Phillips’s talk:

Carl Phillips suggest that a poem can be a space where unlike things are made alike or associated under a common umbrella. When you are working with two or more unlike things to create associations in a poem, how can you balance the creation of similarities with the creation of surprise or newness? Are there limits to this? How, as poets, do you decide when you are stretching the limits of associating several unlike things? Is it possible to write a

poem that subverts so many semantic expectations that it begins to feel as if the poem goes too far in stretching boundaries? Where and how might you find a balance?