

“I am from...” Poems

We want children to be able to connect their lives at home and in their communities to their lives in school, to be able to share with us and their classmates who they are and what matters to them outside of school, as well as inside of school. A literacy practice that helps to make these vital connections between the world of home and community and the world of school is “I am from” poems.

“I am from” poems are a type of list poem, where the writer uses the repeated refrain “I am from” to make a list of what they are from, not limiting themselves to being from a literal place, but thinking more broadly about how they are from the foods, sights, sounds, smells, sayings, people, family, friends, and ancestors in their communities and homes.

Used as a writing practice with children and adults, “I am from” poems are often written by elementary children in grades 3 and above, middle school, and high school students, and even college or adult learners. Common in ESL classes and classes with many newcomers and English language learners, “I am from” poems can provide a way for recent immigrants to share their past lives with new classmates, but these poems are also an equally powerful writing practice for children who have lived in one place or community their entire life.

Why we write “I am from” poems....

We write and share “I am from” poems because they honor and celebrate children’s cultural identities, histories, interests and backgrounds”. They help children get to know each other at the beginning of the year and build awareness of children’s similarities, differences, and unique experiences. When children write about what they are from they celebrate their own identity and culture, and when they listen to or read their classmate’s poems they celebrate others’ identities and cultures.

Many educators have taught “I am from” poems in a wide range of schools across the country, and the world. Katie Kelly’s observations about writing “I am from” poems with a class in New Zealand gets at how writing these poems helps children to share their backgrounds and appreciate others’ backgrounds:

“Writing “I’m From” poems enabled students to share their family traditions, sayings, and innermost thoughts. Because students were taught to value all identities, the voices in Whitney’s classroom were amplified and students were not afraid to share what makes them unique. (Kelly et al., 2020)”

How we write “I am from” poems...

Mentor Text Activities

Discuss how we are all from the people, places, sights, sounds, smells, and activities in our families and communities. Then read aloud examples of “I am from” poems, including ones written by yourself, other children, and other adults, as well as picture books with a similar broad poetic concept of what it means to be from a place, family, and community.

“I am from...” Poems

- Read aloud Yamile Saied Mendez’s picture book *Where Are You From?* in which a little girl’s abuelo explains that the answer to the question “Where are you from?” is as much about the people and experiences you cherish, as any specific location. (Available in Spanish as *De donde eres?*)
- Make your own “I am from” poem to share with children, modeled on George Ella Lyon’s poem, “Where I am From” (Kelly et al, 2020) (Laminack and Kelly, 2019).

I am from oat cakes and soft-boiled eggs.

I am from dogs under the kitchen table.

I am from guppies, and minnows and tiddlers.

I am from climbing to the very top of the beech tree.

I am from yarn and yarn and more yarn

Knitted into sweaters, and hats, and socks.

I am from stories about bikes ridden to work.

- Share “I am from” poems from other children, close in age to our class.

I'M FROM
I AM FROM THE IPAD AND NINTENDO,
FROM MY APARTMENT,
FROM THE ROSE BUSH OUTSIDE.
I AM FROM MY ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILY,
FROM CALIFORNIA.
I AM FROM MY MOM AND DAD.
I AM FROM "NEVER GIVE UP."
I AM FROM SUSHI AND RICE BOWLS.
I AM FROM THE PAVEMENT WHERE I LIKE TO PLAY
WITH MY FRIENDS.
I AM FROM THE MEMORIES I HAVE OF LIFE IN
CALIFORNIA
AND FROM THE NEW MEMORIES I'VE MADE IN
SOUTH CAROLINA.

(from Kelly et al., 2020)

- Read George Ella Lyon’s directions for how to write “I am from” poems with older students and adults, and think about the ways her processes is applicable to younger children.

“I am from...” Poems

Pre-Writing Activities:

Model how to use the following table to think and write about where you are from. After children have filled out the table, then model how to use the information in the table to write an “I am from” poem.

I am from...

Foods I eat with my family and friends

I am from...

What I see, hear, smell and appreciate in my home and community

I am from...

Sayings, words, or phrases I hear and use in my family or community

I am from...

The people, family, friends, relatives, and ancestors I know in my family and community

**Adapted from: The University of Minnesota’s “I am From” Activity Guide: A Tool to Foster Student Interaction in the Classroom, 2016.*

For a more open-ended form of pre-writing activity, consider brainstorming and modeling some categories and examples for what you are from, and then, instead of using a table such as the one above with specified categories, have children make their own lists of what they are from, or do a bubble chart with “I am from...” in the middle and connected bubbles with all the things they are from.

Post-Writing Activities

- Children can share their poems in a variety of ways:
 - With the whole class, small groups, or partners
 - Through a gallery walk, four-corners activity, or online platform
- Children can reflect on what they learned about their own lives and identities from writing their poems.
- Children can ask their classmates follow up questions about their poems to learn more about their classmates lives and identities: “One student exclaimed, ‘I had no idea what Festivus was until reading Lucy’s poem!’ The sharing process shed light on the diversity in Whitney’s classroom, leading to class discussions and students’ further understanding of one another” (Kelly, et al. 2020)

Considerations:

While many children may eagerly participate in writing and discussing where they are from, some children, for whatever reasons, may not want to participate in work on this topic, and this choice should be respected. In particular, immigrant children who have experienced trauma or are longing for their homeland may find it healing to write about where they are from, or may find it just the opposite. Therefore, teachers should remain attentive to children’s attitudes towards this work, and not push them to do it if they do not wish to.

Works Cited and Further Reading:

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