

POEMS OF QUESTIONS

by Perie Longo and Phyllis Meshulam

From Perie Longo: “Another thought for poems surrounding grief and trauma is Pablo Neruda's question poems from his *Book of Questions*. In my Hospice work when I was asked to come to a school where a 7th or 8th grader had been killed in a plane crash with her father, I gave the students some of Neruda's questions and talked about death as one of the great mysteries as is sudden disappearance of any kind. Often there are no answers to the questions we have. Just write the questions. The students' poems uncovered every aspect of grief and sadness. I also told them that a wise man once said, ‘really good questions have no answers.’ After the session they said it helped to have a place to express the ache in their hearts, and confusion, which is one of poetry's ability to help heal.”

1. We recommend that you obtain one or more of Pablo Neruda's question poems from his *Book of Questions*. You can find a sample here: <http://www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/poems-week-2009-2010/poem-week/book-questions-pablo-neruda>
2. Phyllis has used LXXII for older students. Perie has used excerpts from Nancy Willard's “Questions my Son Asked Me, Answers I Never Gave Him,” which would be good for younger kids: <https://cerene.wordpress.com/2006/07/16/questions-my-son-asked-me-answers-i-never-gave-him-nancy-willard/> We're sure there are many options. Copy the poem and add to your worksheet.
3. Perie used some lines from one of Neruda's poems: “Is there anything in the world sadder/ Than a train standing in the rain?” A second grader who didn't talk much said, “Yes, I know something. A little boy whose parents died in a car crash.” Perie then asked if he knew such a boy and he said, “Yes, that little boy is me.” This is a very difficult moment that can often happen when teaching poetry lessons. Perie's response was simple. “That is way more sad and I'm so sorry that terrible thing happened to you.” Kids have used the question as a model replacing “sadder than” with “Is anything more lonely than,” or any other emotional subject. Sometimes they are very poignant such as “Is anything worse than losing a soccer game by one point?”
4. Remind students that there are many mysteries in life and that they have as much right as anyone to try to pose questions, to understand, to search.
5. Invite students to read individual questions on the worksheet, pointing out that these are poems made up entirely of unanswerable questions.
6. Invite students to think of a question that has no answer, or has no answer now. “Just some of those things you wonder about.” Give them time to think and/or confer with neighbors.
7. Invite students to share a question they have thought of and write on the board a group poem composed of questions.
8. Then students will do their own... Tell them, “You can make a whole poem out of questions.”
9. Sometimes we bring in vocabulary posters – just large sheets of butcher paper with lots of words writ large. Some that seem appropriate for this lesson might include words about -- weather, emotions, geology, moon geography, outer space, plants....



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SAMPLE POEMS

WONDERS

I wonder if I look at the moon
will I take off and never come back?

I used to think that when you died
you'd come back to life.

I wonder if I could be a star
with a very big twinkle in my eye.

I wonder what I'm made of:
moons or Bigfoot or the tiniest ant.

I wonder if on Valentine's day
you hung up stockings if you'd get
a foot of hearts.

What does the sun hang from?
Why is the world here today when
wind is howling like a ghost?

--Group Poem, gr. 5

Prepared by: Perie Longo

HOW DID THIS START?

Is it true the human population started from two
people?

Why all the lies?

Why all the hate??

Why is the world so ill?

How cold is her heart and the blood that runs
through her veins?

Why do I wake up

every morning

when I can just sleep

deep into my dreams?

--Group poem, Los Guilicos High School

Organized by Phyllis Meshulam

**Write a poem made up of questions that have
no answers, or answers so difficult that people
cannot understand them.**

Try for at least four of these.

**OR Ask one unanswerable question and
experiment with making up answers to it in
your poem.**