



How to Start a Narrative Workshop near you

Since 2014, writers Imogen Lycett Green and Barbara Doherty have pioneered the use of poetry in Narrative Workshops at the Brighton Health & Wellbeing centre, an integrated NHS practice in East Sussex. Reading, discussion and expressive writing in response to poetry have been proven to increase emotional *and* physical resilience. Narrative Workshops help people who are grieving; people suffering from anxiety, depression or related disorders; people suffering from stress. At BHWC, Imogen and Barbara work with patients but also, due to popular demand, with groups of doctors and nurses. As well as being interesting and fun, Narrative Workshops reduce burn out!

Narrative Workshops were developed following a simple and effective format, and can be adapted for use with friends, colleagues and at schools.

You will need to...

- Gather a group of friends or colleagues.
- Choose a poem.
- Set aside an hour of your time; bring paper, pens and a copy of the poem for everyone.
- Follow the system of '**close reading**' (see below) to analyse the poem. Nobody needs a degree in English literature to do this; it is simply a felt response to the words, rhythms, sounds and song of the poet. We guarantee 'close reading' works **EVERY TIME!** In fact, the more difficult the poem appears at first, the more fun this process will be.
- Find a facilitator amongst you who can lead the way and nudge the group along. The facilitator brings the poem. You may want to change the facilitator each week, if everyone wants to have a go.

In detail, a workshop runs like this:

Step 1

Read the poem out loud at least twice, choosing a different reader each time.

Step 2

Facilitator initiates a '**close reading**' following the guide:

Observation: Signs of perceiving – seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. Details, descriptions, sensory aspects of the scenes.

Perspective: were multiple perspectives represented, explored, guessed at? How were these perspectives conveyed?

Form: Describe the genre (sonnet/blank verse/shape poem for instance). Notice any use of metaphor or imagery, describe the temporal structure of the text. Are events told in chronological order, in reverse or in chaotic sequence? What is the diction – formal, breezy, loving, scientific?

Voice: Whose voice tells? Is the narrative told in a first person, second person or third person voice? Is the teller near or far? Intimate or remote? And can you feel its presence as you read? Is the telling self-aware?

Mood: What is the mood of the text? What mood does reading it leave you in?

Motion: What does the poem do? Does the teller seem to move from the beginning to the end? Does the poem bring you somewhere in its course?

As you hear the rhythms and comment on the language, tone and imagery, you will unpick the poem between you. Everybody will bring something new to the group. People will vary hugely in their interpretations. One person may feel it is loving, another cruel. This will depend on how the group member is feeling at the time. They will each find what they need in the poem. Be kind! Listen to the poem and listen to each other. Everyone's opinion is valid.

Step 3

After fifteen to twenty minutes of debate, the facilitator will give the participants a prompt (a word or phrase taken from the poem, devised earlier), then everybody (including the facilitator!) must write continuously for 15 minutes. Often participants think they don't know what to write, but 9 times out of 10, once they have started writing, they find their pen takes them on journeys that they had not expected - journeys into their past, into their dreams for the future or into their heart. Sometimes a wall stands between the writer and their feelings, but over time, the participant feels more comfortable with the practice and he or she begins to write from an authentic place within his or herself. Often, a participant will revisit trauma they have experienced.

Step 4

After writing, everyone reads their piece to the group. Again you'd think this would be difficult, but in a warm and safe circle, reading out loud does not seem unnatural. There follows further discussion about everyone's reaction to the prompt word and then the session is brought to a close.

This practice depends on the emotional power of literature. If a writer has dredged their emotional hinterland to find the exact language and rhythm to describe and create the atmosphere of a particular feeling or scenario, then it follows that by reaching for the poet's meaning a reader/listener will be required to go on a similar journey. A group travelling together to this deeper place is able to develop closeness and understanding in a short time. Sharing is powerful! Sharing is cathartic.



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