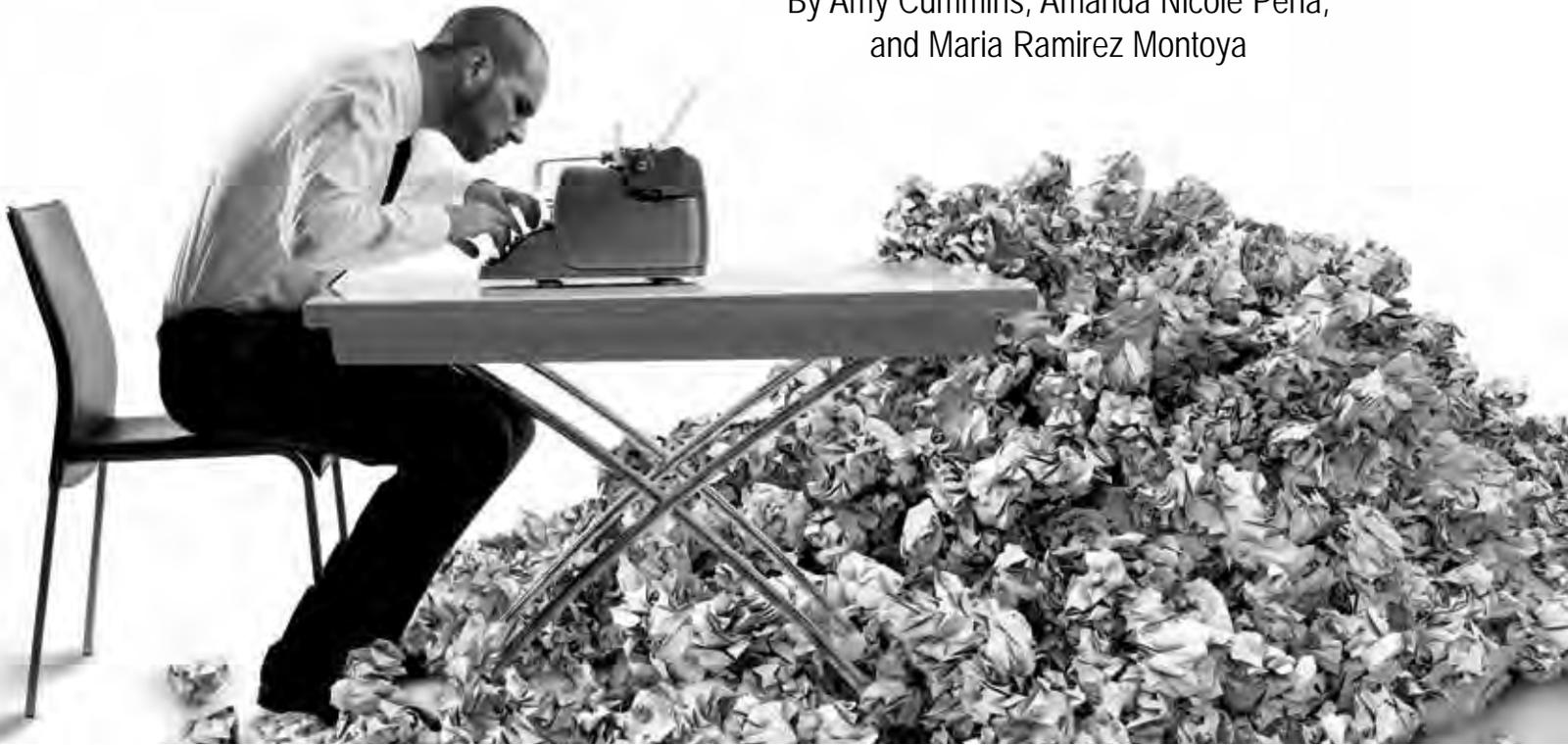


# Teachers as Writers: Explorations in Form

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**Abstract:** English teachers should write and share their writing. The authors analyze how composing sonnets added to understanding of poetic genre, literary terminology, and state standards. This article argues on behalf of more creative writing in English language arts and explains the benefits of teachers and students sharing their writing.

**Keywords:** creative writing, literary genres, sonnet, TEKS

ELAR teachers benefit from writing creatively in multiple genres because we practice our knowledge of content and what we teach. Current and future teachers should share their work to contribute to building a community of literacy. We have an obligation to set the example for our current and future students by engaging in writing ourselves. Although many students or teachers may initially feel at a disadvantage in the creative element, power comes from writing about our experiences, dreams, aspirations, or everyday life.

As English majors preparing to be ELAR teachers in Texas, co-authoring with the instructor of the university English course, we found that the experience of writing sonnets helped us to unlock creativity and think about how poetic genre contributes to meaning. Compressing meaning into fourteen lines helped us to focus and to consider every word and syllable. We saw that a sonnet is not just block-shaped verse from the past but can be a form for everyday use.

Challenging ourselves to write in more genres brings pride. In addition to being ELAR teachers who read, assign, and assess poetry, educators can become poets next to their students. Instructors regularly give students nonfiction assignments, and while lesson plans and course handouts require creativity, they differ from literary genres. The impact of the National Writing Project model shows that doing personal and professional writing is a crucial way in which teachers learn about teaching writing. While classroom emphasis remains on the students' writing, educators also should write what they assign so that they, too, can

get firsthand knowledge, which in turn will help with devising suitable approaches for students.

Writing alongside students benefits teachers. Molly Adams (2013) writes about the time she “decided to practice what I wanted to preach. They wrote; I wrote. They read; I read. We read aloud; we read at home” (p. 21). This approach to a writing workshop achieved great impact in helping her students see themselves as writers by writing and sharing. Morgan Pesek (2018) also encourages teachers to “practice what we preach” (p. 12) by sharing about our own reading and writing. Pesek urges fellow teachers, “When you become another reader and writer in the room instead of the reader and writer in the room, you create community and give your students space to bring their voices into the classroom” (p. 12).

Class time should not be limited to preparation for genres mandated on standardized testing. Authentic writing assignments will build students’ own voices and lifelong literacy. Kelly Gallagher (2006) describes how students write better “when they care about what they are writing” (p. 91), and providing choice fosters caring: “Choice generates a welcome chain reaction; it creates student buy-in, which in turn generates writing motivation, which in turn causes students to write better” (p. 91). Developing one’s own style in any genre builds confidence and autonomy.

Another advantage of writing creatively in literary genres is that it helps meet an ELAR TEKS standard that appears in grades 1 to 12. The ELAR TEKS standard (10)(A) for English I through IV states that students will “compose literary texts such as fiction and poetry using genre characteristics and craft” (Texas Education Agency, 2017c). For middle school grades, the wording of ELAR TEKS standard (11)(A) explicitly adds one type of writing, stating that students will “compose literary texts such as personal narratives, fiction, and poetry using genre characteristics and craft” (Texas Education Agency, 2017b), and this wording also appears as ELAR TEKS standard (12)(A) for elementary grades (Texas Education Agency, 2017a). The activity of composing literary texts in any form also provides personally meaningful experiences for all stages of the writing process.

Writing sonnets or other poetry helps with applying literary terminology that appears in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English Language Arts and Reading across many grade levels. Learning about how figurative language and form contribute to meaning can be done not only through studying definitions and identifying the devices in the writing of others, but also through writing one’s own examples. The restrictions of the sonnet genre may also increase creativity. An alternative to the sonnet form can be free verse poetry that is just as valuable. Research supports the use of writing free verse, or open form poetry, as well as reinforcing the value of having students write “artistic statements to accompany the poems” (Song, 2019, p. 77) in which the writers reflect on inspiration, literary devices, revisions, and lessons learned. Teachers and learners build personal connections to the power of language by using it for our own purposes.

### Composition Strategies

The original impetus for writing our own sonnets was our university English course. Our task was to write a sonnet and a self-analysis reflecting on purposes, process, and figurative language usage. Variations of form were allowed, but the assignment needed to approach the English (Shakespearean) form, the Italian (Petrarchan) form, or even the Spenserian sonnet form, which have distinctive

rhyme schemes (Murfin & Ray, 2018, p. 413). After each class member wrote an original, fourteen-line poem, a peer response workshop provided feedback for revisions. On the submission date, there was a time for sharing in front of the class, and most class members showed the printed text on a document camera while reading aloud and discussing their sonnets. Finally, there was opportunity for revising the sonnet further if a class member wished to include it in the final portfolio of work from the course.

Assigning a poem does not mean that a topic must be specified, but providing prompts will spur creativity if your students need that. Writing a sonnet about a person who means a lot to you taps into the time-honored motif of love sonnets. Writing about an incident that recently happened captures that moment and processes feelings about it. Poet Laynie Browne (2010) offers approaches to sonnets in her essay in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Browne’s suggestions include “Write a sonnet composed entirely of questions, or composed entirely of answers,” and “Write a sonnet that is a series of guesses to an implied, mysterious, or stated riddle/question” (p. 100).

The speaker of a poem is often quite different from the poet and certainly from the reader too. Writing, like reading, helps us connect with and develop empathy for others even when it comes to issues that may not affect a person directly. Using critical lenses to look at literature for interpretation is a recognized part of curriculum, and creative writing provides additional opportunities to inhabit perspectives that are not the author. Browne invites the sonneteer to “be someone else for the duration of fourteen lines” (p. 98). Retelling events from a work of literature read for class can involve taking the point of view of a major, minor, or invented character from that text.

Creative writing assignments like composing a sonnet offer a balance between meeting required state standards and covering our own choice of topic. Creative writing assignments thus can support learning the classics of literature. For crafting sonnets in English language arts, many mentor texts are available online from authors such as Gwendolyn Brooks, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Terrance Hayes, Claude McKay, and Rita Dove. This assignment helped us explore sonnets with a purpose.

Writing that will be graded should have evaluation criteria stated in advance. Creative writing of sonnets can earn points toward an assignment grade in categories such as presentation in the required genre, effort to follow the rhyme pattern of the chosen type of sonnet, use of figurative language, demonstration of effort, the content of a self-analysis statement accompanying the sonnet, and editing. We recommend having students identify how their own use of figurative language such as personification, metaphor, or simile contributes to meaning.

Teachers may not wish to require from the outset that students write in a closed form such as a sonnet. Although a teacher can choose to “frontload form” and assign creative writing to be in a certain genre and covering a particular topic, the alternate approach is “formlessness first, form last” (Davidson & Fraser, 2009, p. 28). Then words that are written lead to the structure that works for each individual creative idea. Creative writing teachers regularly use this “process-oriented approach” to “let form and structure dawn on rather than direct you” (Davidson & Fraser, 2009, p. 28). While this approach typically leads to free verse—an open form rather than a closed form—written material that gets generated could also be refined and shaped into a specific genre. Creative writing courses

often assign writing in genres such as a villanelle, sestina, or sonnet, but English classes with other purposes may not have this time.

### Writing Our Own Sonnets

This article sharing our experiences promotes creative writing among Texas teachers. The following sections provide the three co-authors' sonnets and parts of our individual statements of reflection and self-analysis.

#### Amy's Sonnet and Statement

##### "The Imagined Thoughts of Berta from *The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales"

I am Berta, from *The Tequila Worm*,  
A supportive cousin to Sofia—  
Her foil, in a literary term.  
"Candy Bite" chapter gives the idea  
That I am selfish, but that's not my flaw.  
I love my prima. We're just not the same.

Sofia had plans to enter the law,  
To travel, and to make up her own game.  
Sofia's ambitions burst through the seams.  
I fell in love with Jamie, growing up in  
McAllen. I met the man of my dreams  
As a kid and never doubted again;  
Raising our two sons well is my career.  
Yet in my heart, my comadre stays near.

**Amy's Self-Analysis:** My poem was written from the imagined perspective of a minor character in one of my favorite books, *The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales (2005). The novel does not tell much about Berta, a cousin of protagonist Sofia Casas. Sofia realizes her academic talents and moves away for school and career while remaining "a good comadre" who cares for her family and community (Canales, 2005, p. 5). Berta, by contrast, stays home in the culture in which they were raised. Berta's voice deserves to be heard too. Of course, not all readers interpret this character the same way.

As the instructor who gave the assignment to write sonnets, I drafted sample sonnets of my own and shared two of them. Although based on the Elizabeth sonnet form, the rhythm deviated from iambic pentameter. Along with angst due to inexperience in composing sonnets, I found enjoyment in completing the exercise. The discipline of fourteen lines made me abbreviate what would have gone on for too long if I had written in free verse. Shaping thoughts into the restrictions of the form, I enacted the assignment I had given.

#### Amanda Nicole's Sonnet and Statement

##### "The Syncope Sonnet"

There's a lingering itch that can't be scratched  
Festering in the corner of my mind.  
A deadly predator eager to hatch  
Raging to break the reality bind.

Clawing his way, fighting for the surface  
His low growl gradually grows stronger.  
Battling for my eyes, my sense of purpose  
Every blink to stay awake feels longer

It's when all goes dark the battle is lost,  
I lie like prey waiting for the slaughter.  
I'm at the diverged road of Robert Frost  
Begging God, have mercy on your daughter.

At last! A ray of salvation shines through  
Forcing him to retreat as I come to.

**Amanda Nicole's Self-Analysis:** My Shakespearean sonnet exemplifies the internal struggle of battling a condition, syncope, from the perspective of a resilient speaker. When considering what I felt was worth writing about, I looked back to being in the 504 program in high school, a program that accommodates students with special conditions, and knew that this was the topic that I needed to explore. Being in the program, I quickly learned that topics of disability are not widely discussed in classrooms, and this causes people who have them to feel unrepresented and/or isolated. I believe that by writing about this, I not only connected on a deeper level with my own personal relationship of creative writing and poetry, but I could use it to connect with my future students and possibly inspire them to write about topics that are more meaningful to them.

By writing and sharing sonnets like this, we can create bridges that lead to conversations about poetry and literary devices like metaphors, allusions, and similes. The metaphor and personification throughout the sonnet are identifiable as the syncope episode being a deadly predator. Also wanting to include an allusion, I refer to "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost as I felt that the poem illustrates perfectly how uncharted territories are worth exploration. I enjoyed being able to attempt to write a sonnet because of how structured it was and how it makes a writer dig deep and use devices to tell a story.

#### Maria's Sonnet and Statement

##### "A Poem to My Mom's Chancla"

The chancla is my ardent enemy  
I weep and cry for chancla's tyrant grasp  
Its claws sink deep when thrown it lands on me  
Like a tumultuous bull I can't unclasp

And when in doubt of chancla's loving force  
My better judgment leaves and I regress  
I act as wildly as an untamed horse  
And pull my brother's hair clean from its place

The bonds that chancla has are lifelong strong  
This is the truth, I'm real, it's no charade  
For it detects me even when I'm gone  
Chancla will always be there for my aid

O chancla, won't you stop your tyrant ways?  
Or should I just reform and become swayed?

**Maria's Self-Analysis:** I wrote the sonnet "A Poem to My Mom's Chancla" inspired by the Mexican chancla memes on Facebook. Although I originally planned to write a funny poem dealing with the use of the chancla Mexican (and Mexican American) moms use to discipline their children, in the end the poem gained substance and became a symbol of the importance of my culture and of love through my mother's discipline in the use of a shoe.

I made use of personification to humanize the chancla, and in doing so, the chancla came to symbolize my mother, the user behind the chancla. Since the poem is dealing with an aspect of my culture that is important to me, I decided to write the word chancla in Spanish. The intended target audience prioritizes Mexican Americans like me because I want them to read it and identify with a part of this poem that expresses a part of our culture.

### In Conclusion: Many Poems to Be Written

We encourage teachers to write alongside their students and to share creative work with students, colleagues, and beyond. As our experience composing sonnets showed, the challenge of the format added to the unique value of the assignment. By writing actual sonnets, we now understand the genre much better than from just analyzing examples. Many aspects of ELAR can be incorporated with assignments to write poetry and study classic examples. State standards provide justification for having students compose literary texts. Including creative writing opportunities within English Language Arts and Reading can lead students to self-discovery and empathy towards others. When sharing with classmates through peer response and presenting to the class, students further hone communication skills. Authentic engagement will have students caring more about the impact of their words. Inservice and preservice teachers of literature, reading, and writing need to keep reading, writing, and sharing their own writing in multiple genres.

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