

Acrostics: Creative Writing and Fraktur



Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Acrostic is a poetic pattern in which a particular letter in each line of a poem spells out a word or phrase. The most common pattern, and the easiest to identify, is when the first letter of each line read from top to bottom makes a common word or phrase. The writer may decide to make the pattern of each line as simple or difficult as he or she might wish. One could write a sonnet or a ballad using this device, but most are simpler, having a set number of words per line or set number of syllables or poetic feet. The writer may wish to make it easy to identify the subject word or phrase, or make it difficult to find so that reading the acrostic becomes like solving a puzzle or riddle. Using an interior or end letter makes the act of deciphering more difficult (even obscure). Capitalizing or otherwise highlighting the significant letters, such as through Fraktur, makes it easier for readers. The attached samples should make a few alternatives clear. A writer, poet, English teacher, activities coordinator, or volunteers can direct the lesson plan.

TIME:

One to two hours over one to two sessions. A short, simple acrostic can be composed in only a few minutes, but instruction time for beginning the activity might take ten or fifteen minutes. In a group setting, or with multiple topics, the writing activity could last up to one hour. If reproductions of or decorations to the writing were added, the project could extend over multiple sessions of an hour or more.

MATERIALS:

- Pens
- Pencils
- Paper
- Colored pens
- Colored pencils
- Colored fine-point markers
- Large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper (25" x 30" is standard)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

(Recommended optional publication: *It Seems Like Only Yesterday: Memories from the Residents of Hill Top Home of Comfort* by Dr. David Solheim, Vicki Pennington, and Stacy Lemke. Dickinson, ND: Hill Top Heritage Foundation, 2007. This publication features the creative writing of residents at an elder care facility.)

**“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM,
HELPLESSNESS):**

This activity primarily would reduce boredom, as it provides participants with intellectual and imaginative activity. If conducted in a group setting, there could be interaction among participants, which should thereby reduce loneliness. Some subjects and topics (personal names or professions) could enhance self-image and reduce a feeling of helplessness.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

Dr. Charles B. Hall, Ph.D., of Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, co-authored a study on memory loss and other symptoms associated with Alzheimer’s disease. He and others, over approximately a five-year period, studied people in their 70s and 80s who were free from Alzheimer’s disease at the beginning of the study. They evaluated and measured the frequency with which those individuals participated in mentally challenging activities like crossword puzzles, playing cards or board games, reading, writing, playing music, and participating in group discussions. While participating in these activities did not prevent the onset of Alzheimer’s disease, it may have delayed the rapid memory loss, thinking problems, and other symptoms that occur with the disease.

*--Hall, C.B., Ph.D., R.B. Lipton, M.D., and M. Sliwinski, Ph.D.
“Cognitive Activities Delay Onset of Memory Decline in
Persons Who Develop Dementia.” Neurology 73
(August 2009): 356-361.*

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 HOUR):

I. The first part of this activity is to introduce the idea of acrostics to participants and share a few of the attached examples. An instructor might begin by suggesting a starting word or topic (I have had good luck with personal names, seasonal holidays, and concrete, physical objects). Afterwards, one then might suggest a pattern to follow. It is suggested to begin with a limit of one word per line, with the aim of making a complete sentence (loosely related to the topic word). See acrostic examples below written by Dave Solheim and his former students. (Writing the examples in big, bold letters on large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper that is hung on the wall, making it easier for the participants to see, is recommended strongly.)

Doves
Are
Very
Entertaining.

Pieces
Of
Everyone's
Minds.

Fly
Like
Autumn leaves so
Graciously floating like
Stars at night.

Love
Your
Neighbor
Now
Even
Though
They
Eat the apples off your favorite tree.

Pigs
Are
Messy.

Soft
Needles
On
Weeds.

Finally in
Autumn
Leaves are
Lazy.

Pine trees
In
Never
Ending
Currents from
Oceans
Never
Ending voyage
S.

An old memory device:

G eorge
E dwards'
O ld
G randfather
R ode
A
P ig
H ome
Y esterday.

D own
A long
V ictory (*attempting an obscure pun here, as my father's name was Victor E.*)
I sland,
D estruction.

2. As a group activity, one could use a seasonal or holiday word and have each participant write one line of the poem. (Again, the writer may make the pattern of each line as simple or difficult as he or she might wish. Even one descriptive word or phrase per line would work.) In a more difficult and creative example, one could require that each addition be a new phrase, or even an alliterative phrase (one that repeats initial consonant sounds). For example, each line for a Thanksgiving theme would have an alliterative phrase of something for which to be thankful.

T en tom turkeys
H andfuls of herbs
A utumnal artisans
N ature's napping
K issing kin
S ilent solitude
G enerous graceful giving
I nsightful instants
V iolet vistas
I ntegrity
N ever-ending notions of
G ladness.

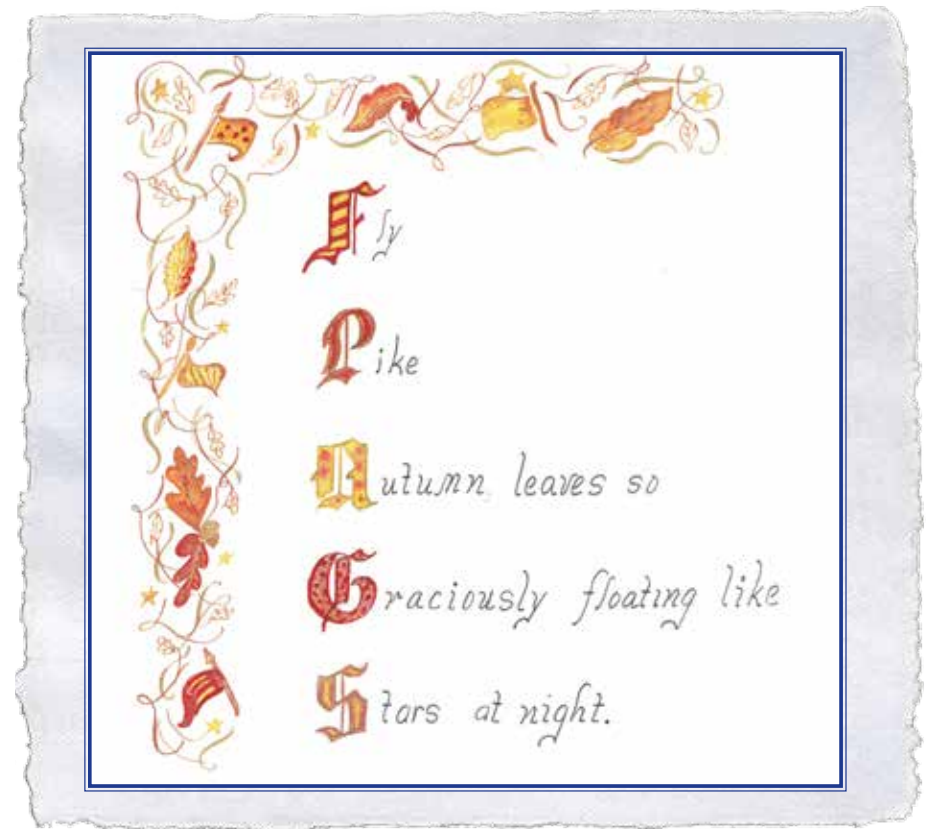
(Write the example in big, bold letters on large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper that is hung on the wall to make it easier for the participants to see.)

SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

I. As individuals or groups draft acrostics they like, one could begin the reproduction or printing process. The Fraktur letters in the article “The Art of Fraktur: A Living Tradition,” on pages 338-339 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, would allow for a way of emphasizing the topic word and beautifying the samples of the participants’ work. First read this article to the participants. Then show them the letters and designs. One could copy the letters from the text, or, with art instruction, have the participants design original letters and designs in the illuminated style. The created designs could incorporate images and colors related to the words or topic.

The Fraktur designs can be as simple or as ornate as one wants to make them. However, this task may be daunting to some initially. Offering guidance and recommending a step-by-step procedure may provide the nudge some folks will require to achieve the desired design result. For instance, on an enlarged sample from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, point out that the designs are made up of repeated lines and shapes, often in some kind of sequence. Identify various kinds of lines that one could use by referring to things the participants already know, such as curved lines which resemble the letters “s” or “e” or “c.” Point out various shapes that are seen in the Fraktur example, such as flowers, leaves, fruits, and dots. Demonstrate that a pattern is created by repeating lines, shapes, images, and colors. Taking the time to do this will make the creation of Fraktur designs more comfortable for the participants.

See the acrostic example to the right by one of Dave Solheim’s



students and the accompanying Fraktur artwork by Terese Rotenberger.

On large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper, replicating the acrostic above as another example for the participants is very much encouraged. (Or print the acrostic from the first page and distribute copies for viewing.) Point out how the colors and designs utilized are evoked by the poem itself, as are the images. Point out the autumn colors of gold, yellow, brown, and red, and the repetition of falling leaves, flags, and stars, as well as S-shaped lines which work to tie everything together.

RECOMMENDED OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES:

I. Loneliness and isolation from family, friends, and the community outside of the elder care facility negatively impact the residents. Giving the residents something to look forward to, as well as increasing interaction with family, friends, and others in the larger community, is vitally important. In light of this, consider utilizing an interactive letter-writing activity focused on haiku. Develop a short text describing acrostic. With that text, include an acrostic whose first line was written by the resident, with or without the help of a volunteer or activity coordinator, inviting the recipient of the letter to join in the creation of the poem by writing the second line. Instruct the recipient to return the letter, whereupon the facility resident will write the third line of the poem, and so on and so forth until the acrostic is complete. Upon completion, both the facility resident and the invited creative partner should have a complete acrostic. When choosing a topic word, select something positive and uplifting to get the residents' minds off difficulties and health issues. Choose words like home, friendship, love, peace, family, hope, sunny, blue skies.

AUTHOR • DAVE SOLHEIM:

Dave is a Professor of English at Dickinson State University, Dickinson, North Dakota. He holds English degrees from Gustavus Adolphus College, Stanford University, and the University of Denver. He is a veteran of the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Artist in Residence Program*, participating frequently since 1974. During the 1990s, he regularly conducted creative writing activities at the Hill Top Home of Comfort, an elder care facility in Killdeer, North

Dakota. Dr. Solheim has taught creative writing to students as young as the primary grades, to secondary and college students, up through graduate students and octogenarians. In 1989, he was chosen to be the North Dakota Statehood Centennial Poet, and is a North Dakota Associate Poet Laureate. Solheim is the author of five books of poetry: *On the Ward* (1974), *Inheritance* (1987), *West River: 100 Poems* (1989), *The Landscape Listens* (1999), and *Green Jade and Road Men: Translations, Commentary, and Poems of China* (2011). Samples of participants' work from various writing workshops have been published in three anthologies: *Voices North in Dakota* (1976), *Plainsongs* (1978), and *It Seems Like Only Yesterday: Memories from the Residents of Hill Top Home of Comfort* (2007).

AUTHOR • TERESE ROTENBERGER:

Terese is a Fraktur and ornamental penmanship artist from Milnor, North Dakota. She apprenticed to a Hutterite Fraktur artist through the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Folk and Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program*. Fraktur art is an elaborate, colorful, and rare tradition used to decorate hymnals, baptism and wedding certificates, and for recording genealogy in family Bibles, as well as in other illuminated, manuscript-like texts. Terese also practices Spencerian, or ornamental, penmanship and flourishing. Her interest in this tradition began in her early teenage years after seeing a book owned by her great-grandfather and after using this art as physical therapy for her right hand.

(All Fraktur artwork by Terese Rotenberger. Activity plan and all acrostics by Dave Solheim.)

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