

# Acrostics: Holiday Greeting Cards 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 ballad using this device, but most are simpler, having a set number of words per line or set number of syllables or poetic feet. Capitalizing or otherwise highlighting the significant letters, such as through Fraktur, makes it easier for readers. This activity plan involves writing acrostics decorated with Fraktur artwork for holiday greeting cards. A writer, poet, English teacher, activities coordinator, or volunteers can direct the plan.

## TIME:

One to five and a half hours over one to five sessions (three hours are made up of optional activities). A short, simple acrostic can be composed in only a few minutes, but instruction time and beginning the activity might take ten or fifteen minutes. In a group setting, or if using multiple topics, the writing activity could last up to one hour. If decorations are added to the acrostics, the project could extend over multiple sessions of an hour or more. Each session is integrated with and builds successively upon the other. However, each session can be done independently of the others, making for

greater flexibility with regard to the participants' attendance from meeting to meeting.

## MATERIALS:

- Pens and pencils
- Colored pens and colored pencils
- Fine or medium-point colored markers
- White sheets of hard stock paper (big enough to be folded into large greeting cards)
- Large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper (25" x 30" is standard)
- Computer, printer, and possibly a scanner
- 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 of an elder care facility.)

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

This activity can be done by individuals or as part of a group. The group setting is designed to encourage interaction and conversation as a way of addressing the sense of loneliness. While some participants may have motor skills issues that inhibit their participation, they may be able to participate in the discussion and generate ideas for others, thus addressing the sense of helplessness. Keeping the acrostic simple and helping one another in a group setting also can help to combat this sense of helplessness. As an intellectual and imaginative activity, the plan is aimed directly at alleviating boredom. Working in any kind of poetic form like acrostic is an intellectual exercise and as such will have the mental benefits associated with working crosswords and other word (and number) games. The creation of artistic, personalized greeting cards that can be sent to family members and friends is designed to increase interaction with people outside of the care facility. Addressing loneliness in this way can be especially poignant during the holidays.

### **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:**

“Actual and perceived social isolation are both associated with increased risk for early mortality. In this meta-analytic review, our objective is to establish the overall and relative magnitude of social isolation and loneliness and to examine possible moderators. We conducted a literature search of studies (January 1980 to February 2014). . . . The included studies provided quantitative data on mortality as affected by loneliness, social isolation, or living alone. Across studies in which several possible confounds were statistically controlled for, the weighted average effect sizes were as follows: social isolation . . . loneliness . . . and living alone . . . corresponding to an average of 29%, 26%, and 32% increased likelihood of mortality, respectively. We found no differences between measures of objective and subjective social isolation. Results remain consistent across gender, length of follow-up, and world region, but initial health status has an influence on the findings. Results also differ across participant age, with social deficits being more predictive of death in samples with an average age younger than 65 years. Overall, the influence of both objective and subjective social isolation on risk for mortality is comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality.”  
[Abstract]

*--Holt-Lunstad, J., T.B. Smith, M. Baker, T. Harris, and D. Stephenson. “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-analytic Review.” Perspectives on Psychological Science 10 (March 2015): 227-237.*



# Activity Plan

## SESSION 1 (1 HOUR TO 90 MINUTES):

1. The person directing the activity should first tell the participants that, over the course of a few sessions, they will write and decorate a holiday greeting card using acrostic and Fraktur artwork. The card or cards, when finished, can be sent to family members or friends.

2. Introduce the idea of acrostic to the participants. Again, 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 well-known word or phrase. Suggest a pattern to follow, such as a limit of one word per line, with the aim of making a complete sentence (loosely related to the topic word, such as a person's first name) through the reading of the poem. See acrostic examples at right written by Dave Solheim and his former students:

D oves

A re

V ery

E ntertaining.

L ove

Y our

N eighbor

N ow

E ven

T hough

T hey

E at the apples off your favorite tree.

P igs

A re

M essy.

(It is very strongly recommended that the writing examples be printed in big, bold letters on large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper that is hung on the wall, in this way making it easier for the participants to see them.)

3. For practice and as a group, create an acrostic using the first name of the person directing this activity. (Again, use large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper to develop the acrostic.)

4. After this basic introduction, explain that the participants, as a group, will create a holiday acrostic with the first letter of each line, read from top to bottom, spelling the holiday. Suggest a simple

pattern to follow, like a limit of one word per line, with the aim of making a complete sentence loosely related to the topic word (the holiday) through the reading of the poem. If Christmas is approaching, use the word “Christmas” as the topic word. If Thanksgiving is approaching, use the word “Thanksgiving” as the topic. Any holiday can be chosen, such as Valentine’s Day, New Year’s, birthdays, anniversaries, and so forth.

For example, let us choose Christmas. Vertically write “CHRISTMAS” in capital letters on a large sheet of self-stick, easel-pad paper hung on the wall. (Multiple sheets should be displayed in different places, making it easier for everyone to follow and participate regardless of where they are seated. Assistants will be needed to write the suggestions.)

To initiate conversation, memories, imagination, and interaction, read to the group selections involving Christmas traditions from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. (Readings from many holidays, potentially chosen as other word topics, can be found in this book, most notably in Chapter 8, pages 193-221.) With Christmas in mind, read selections and show images from pages 211-219. (For those with memory issues, focusing on imagination and observation generated by pictures may be helpful in fostering interaction.) Then engage the participants in conversation by asking them what comes to mind when they think of Christmas: what images, colors, sounds, traditions, foods, etc. Try to foster discussion between the participants themselves by asking them to share examples of their Christmas traditions, experiences, or observations.

With this conversation as a foundation, now create the Christmas acrostic as a group. Have assistants write the suggestions on the large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper. See the Christmas acrostic example below, written by Dave Solheim:

C heerful  
H appy  
R ascals  
I nsisting  
S anta  
T ake  
M issives  
A skin  
S eriously.

5. At the conclusion of this session, explain that the holiday acrostic they created in this session will be printed on hard stock paper that can be folded into large greeting cards, which they then will decorate with Fraktur artwork in the next session. Ask participants when they want to meet next.

Note: Prior to the second session, an activity coordinator, other staff, a volunteer, or artist should refer to the Fraktur alphabet on page 339 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. That person should write the word “CHRISTMAS” vertically in capital letters using that lettering. Do not add the decorative floral elements around the letters as shown in the book, as the participants will be asked to draw designs for the holiday topic word in the second session. Scan the Fraktur holiday word into a computer using large letters. Include the lines of the

poem, developed by the group in Session 1, with the corresponding letter of the topic word. The letters following the first Fraktur letter of the topic word should be in a regular font style that is easy to read and that is smaller in size than the Fraktur letters. The topic word, “CHRISTMAS,” should be in one color. All the letters making up the poem derived from the topic word should be in another color.

See the example to the right. In the design and printing stage, remember to arrange the poem on the left side of the paper so that it can be folded in half and used as a greeting card. When folded, the poem appears inside the card. It is important to leave plenty of space along the left and top edges of the topic word for the creation of associated designs. On hard stock paper, print copies for the participants to decorate in the next session.



## SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

1. Distribute the holiday acrostic developed as a group in Session 1. Explain that decorative designs, as part of a Fraktur tradition, will be added to the poem as a way of emphasizing the holiday topic word and beautifying the poem. Read to the participants the article “The Art of Fraktur: A Living Tradition” on pages 338-339 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, and then show them the artistic examples.

2. The Fraktur designs can be as simple or as ornate as a person 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 *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, point out that the designs are made up of repeated lines and shapes and images, 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 that 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. Demonstrate examples on several large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper hung in different places in the room, thereby making it easier for the participants to see.

3. Now, for the group holiday poem crafted in Session 1, ask participants to create decorative designs using images, colors, and

feelings evoked by the holiday word, in this case “CHRISTMAS,” and/or evoked by the words composing the poem. The designs should run vertically along the left edge of the holiday word and along the top of the first line of the poem. (The participants are encouraged to create designs in other places, as well, according to their own artistic impulses.) For example, see the work below by Fraktur artist Terese Rotenberger:



Replicating this holiday acrostic on large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper as another example for the participants to refer to is very much encouraged. Point out the Christmas colors of red, white, green, and gold, and the repetition of mistletoe leaves and berries, Santa hats, candy canes, and letters, as well as the repetitive, looped green lines tying everything together.

4. The participants now have a personalized, artistic, poetic, holiday greeting card to send to family and friends.

### SESSION 3 (OPTIONAL ACTIVITY, 1 HOUR):

1. The exact same process as described in Session 1 and Session 2 can be used. However, instead of using one word per line with the aim of making a complete sentence (loosely related to the holiday), require that each addition be an alliterative phrase (one that repeats initial consonant sounds). For example, see another Christmas acrostic (to the right) written by Dave Solheim and decorated by Fraktur artist Terese Rotenberger.

2. Again, to initiate conversation, memories, imagination, and interaction, read selections involving the appropriate holiday from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* (Chapter 8, pages 193-221.)





#### SESSION 4 (OPTIONAL ACTIVITY, 1 HOUR):

1. If participants are enthusiastic about writing holiday acrostics, a session could be added following the same procedures as described above, instead asking participants to create two simple acrostics on their own but within a group setting. The group setting would provide mutual support and encouragement by other participants and the person or persons directing the activity plan.
2. Review with the group the parameters and structure of acrostics in the same way as was done in Session 1. This is important for those who need a refresher and for those who may have memory issues.
3. As the focus of this session, ask that one acrostic be written using the participant's first name or the first name of a loved one, as practice, and another for "Christmas," or whatever holiday is selected.
4. At the end of this session, explain that the next meeting will involve the decoration of their acrostic with Fraktur artwork. Ask participants when they want to meet next.

#### SESSION 5 (OPTIONAL ACTIVITY, 1 HOUR):

1. Explain that the group will decorate the holiday or name acrostics they created in Session 4. Review, explain, and demonstrate the Fraktur tradition and artwork in much the same way as in Session 2. Again, demonstrate by using examples. This session is different than Session 2 in that the participants themselves will have to also write the acrostic word vertically in Fraktur lettering before adding the designs. So, providing examples and demonstrating the writing of the lettering from page 339 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers* is in this way required.
2. Distribute white sheets of hard stock paper big enough to be folded into large greeting cards. Ask the participants to fold the paper and to write the acrostic on the appropriate side for use as a greeting card.
3. The participants now have a personalized, artistic, poetic, holiday greeting card to send to family and friends.

### **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.

### **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).

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

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