

“I Must Say!”

Using Poetry to Jumpstart Student Writing

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Porter

by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

I must say
Yes, sir,
To you all the time.
Yes, sir!
Yes, sir!
All my days
climbing up a great big mountain
Of yes, sirs!

Rich old white man
Owns the world.
Gimme yo’ shoes
To shine.

Yes, sir!

Source: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* edited by Arnold Rampersad (Vintage Classics, 1995). Quoted here under fair use as explained in *Code of Best Practices of Fair Use for Poetry*, p. 11.

Use “Porter” as a Model

By helping us see the details of the daily grind in a new way, poetry and metaphor can help us write about our own life challenges and frustrations at work and elsewhere. Langston Hughes’s poem, “Porter,” is written in the voice of a porter speaking about his job. Try using this poem as a springboard for your own writing.

In “Porter” we hear the voice of a man who knows what he must say in certain situations. This is the voice we adopt whenever we have to climb “a great big mountain” of politeness. There is both anger and defiance in his repeated use of “Yes, sir!” What are the phrases you use repeatedly on



your job? What are the “great big mountains” you have to “climb” at work?

Try Writing Your Own Poem

1. First, read “Porter” as a class. Discuss the use of metaphor (“great big mountain”), figurative speech (“owns the world”), and repetition. Read the student’s poem (which is modeled on “Porter”) on the next page.
2. Then take a few minutes to “free write” about some things you must say or do on the job. Try to incorporate metaphors, figurative speech, and repetition. (Free writing means “keep your pen moving.” Do not worry about spelling or handwriting. Corrections come later.)
3. Revise your writing, shaping it into a poem.
4. If you feel comfortable, share your poem. Ask your listeners or readers, “What do you remember?” or “What stood out?”
5. Revise your poem based on the feedback if it is helpful. Revise again and try reading it out loud.