"I Must Say!" Using Poetry to Jumpstart Student Writing

Hillary Gardner

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

- 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.



Racism at Work

Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein



Jean-Louis: I'm quitting. Jose: How come? Jean-Louis: I don't want to be stuck washing dishes forever. Jose: Your English is good. Why don't you apply for a job at the front desk? Jean-Louis: Have you ever seen a Haitian in the front of the house?

Put It in your Own Words

Describe what you see in the picture. Describe what the dialog is about. Explain how racism happens at work sometimes.



Rooms Per Hour

Ana Contreras

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Think about the word rate. What does it mean? What are some ways you use rate to describe things in your daily life, such as heartbeats per minute or miles per gallon.

2. Have you ever had a job where you had to work at a certain rate? Describe it.

At my job, I am supposed to clean 15 rooms in 8 hours. But it is not easy.

I come in to work at 8:00 am, and I get off at 4:30 pm. We have a meeting for 20 minutes every morning, so we don't start cleaning until about

We have 30 minutes to clean each room.

8:30. We have 30 minutes to clean each room, but sometimes that is not enough time. So we try to clean occupied rooms

in 20 minutes, and we use the extra 10 minutes to clean very dirty rooms and check-outs.

I love my job. That is why I do the best that I can. We have 30 minutes for lunch. But if we have a lot of check-outs or a lot of dirty rooms, sometimes, we only get 15 minutes.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Given the information you have in the article,



how could you express how many rooms Ana cleans per hour? And per shift?

2. What strategies does Ana use to get her work done?

3. If you have a job that requires you to work at a certain rate, what strategies do you use?

Ana Contreras is a housekeeper at a hotel in downtown Boston, MA, where she attends a workplace-based ESOL class.



Describe what you see in the illustration.



Visions for the Future



Jose: I'm sick of this place. They own you here. Nothing ever changes.

Mario: Well, it's better than it was 10 years ago. I've seen a lot of changes since I started here.

Jose: Like what?

Mario: We have longer breaks, better pay, and medical insurance. It took a while, but we won them.

Jose: Yes, but I came to this country to get ahead. I didn't come here to fight for every penny. I'll never make it at this rate. I'm looking for another job.

Mario: Well, wake up. It's the same everywhere. The only way things get better is if we stick together. Things can change. And now a lot of people are supporting us.

Source: Problem Posing at Work, Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein, used with permission from Grass Roots Press.

Thinking about Change

Describe how Jose and Mario each feel. Share a story of when you felt the same way.

Drawing from the articles you read in this issue of *The Change Agent*, list some of the actions people can take to bring change to the workplace. Which of these could you try in your workplace?

Revisit the activity on p. 3. Now that you've read some of the stories in "Good Jobs, Not Just Any Jobs," describe your ideal job. Is your description different from the one you did before you read the magazine?

What is your vision for what work could like? And who should decide?



Being a Tailor: My Math Profession

Ezat Gulla

BEFORE YOU READ: Consider these vocabulary words: tailor, stitch, fabric, pattern, adjust, and tension. Do you sew for your family? What do you measure?

I am a tailor. Math is very important in my work. I need math to make clothes.

For example, a tape measure is an important tool for a tailor. I use a tape measure to measure

I need math to

the customer. Some people are smaller. Other people are larger. So it is impormake clothes. tant to measure the person to get the perfect fit. I also need to measure the fabric.

I do not want to waste fabric. Fabric is not cheap. I do not use any patterns. I just measure.



Try it! Use a tape measure to take some measurements.

I also have to think about math when I adjust the knobs on the sewing machine. For example, I can choose the length of the stitch. The normal length is 2.4 millimeters, but I can adjust that to be longer or shorter. I also have to adjust the tension of the thread. If I do not



A tailor makes and repairs clothes. Here is the author, Ezat Gulla, working at her sewing machine.

adjust the tension, the machine will not work well.

I also use math to shop for fabric. If the fabric is on sale, I use math to figure out the sale price.

Finally, if I sell something, I need to use math to set my price. My price is based on the cost of fabric and the time it took for me to make it. For an Afghan dress, I need about two meters of fabric. For a shirt, I need about 1.5 meters. Some dresses are very hard, but pants and scarves are easy.

AFTER YOU READ: The author talks about measuring stitches in millimeters and measuring fabric in meters. She is using the metric system. In the U.S., we use the metric system to measure some things (such as grams of medicine or liters of soda) and "U.S. customary units" for other things (such as pounds of meat or gallons of milk). Name more items and how we measure them.

Ezat Gulla is a student at the IRIS Mother & Child ESOL Program in New Haven, CT. She is from Afghanistan. Her mother taught her to sew when she was ten years old. Ezat would like to work as a tailor in the U.S., but she wants to learn more English because it is important to talk with the customers about specific styles. Right now, she is happy making clothes for her family and friends. She especially likes to make Afghan dresses for her daughters.



Drywall and Dominoes

Kemmy C. Lewis

BEFORE YOU READ: What jobs have you had that required you to do math? What games do you play that require math?

Math at School

I started to learn math in school when I was 6 years old. At home, my brother taught me how to do fractions by the fireplace. He told me I was good. From that point, I fell in love with math. I learned a lot when I was young, even though sometimes I fell asleep in class. Sometimes I got a perfect score on the test.

After school, I learned how to hang drywall. When I started hanging drywall, I made 25 cents an hour. That was in 1972. By 1989, I was making \$15 a hour.

Math at Work

To do drywall you have to use inches and fractions. Studs have to be 16 inches apart. You have to put the tip of the measuring tape on the factory end of the sheet to measure, then cut it with the T-square. We used a box cutter to cut the drywall perpendicular to the stud. We used a wire cutter to cut the studs so that the studs can fit in the tracks. And we used metal screws to screw the studs to the track.

Math at Play

After work, we would go to the bar and play dominoes. You get 5 points for every score, so you keep

Perpendicular (adj):

when two lines meet at a right angle (90 degrees). You can use a T-Square to make a perpendicular cut.



Kemmy C. Lewis is a student at Delgado Adult Education Program in New Orleans. He would like to go to culinary school. He hopes that this honor of getting published in The Change Agent will help convince the culinary program to finally let him in.

score by counting in multiples of five. The game goes to 150. The first one to 150 wins the game.

Math has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember. My brother helped me feel good about math when I was a little boy, and I've used math my whole life.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. See the definition of "perpendicular" below. Use it in a sentence.

2. Go to <bls.gov/ooh> and find out how much drywall workers can expect to earn today. Make a graph showing the years along one axis and the pay rate along the other axis. Graph the pay that Kenny Lewis earned from 1972 to 1989, and add the current wage rate. What do you notice about the change over time?

3. Bring domino sets to class and play. Ask a student to explain the rules and the scoring. Keep score. Have a tournament!

