Two Poems on the Charles River: Sensory Poetry About Place

Longfellow House-Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site (2024)

*Please send feedback on this lesson to* [*long\_info@nps.gov*](mailto:long_info@nps.gov)*.*

## Essential Question

What places inspire you?

How can poets use the five senses to write about place?

## Objective

Students will be able to:

* Identify examples of descriptive language in poetry;
* Use at least three of the five senses to describe a special place;
* Write a short descriptive poem addressed to a place that inspires them.

## Standards

Massachusetts ELA Standards  
W.3/4/5.3  
SL.3/4/5.1  
SL.3.2  
SL.4.2  
SL.5.2

## Background Information

“Poetry allows you to express yourself, to tell your own story about the things you see and what you feel.” -Yolanda Oliveira

As a writer, famous American poet Henry Longfellow (1807-1882) took inspiration from many things – his family, history, his community, travel, literature, and nature. Born in Portland, Maine, Longfellow lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts for much of his adult life. From the window of his study at 105 Brattle Street (now [Longfellow House-Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site](https://www.nps.gov/long/index.htm)), Longfellow delighted in his view of the Charles River.

Today, Boston youth poet Yolanda Oliveira takes inspiration from Longfellow’s work, and her own experiences of the Charles River.

During this 2-part activity, 3rd-5th grade students will explore the use of descriptive sensory language to convey a sense of place through poetry. After learning about descriptive sensory language and watching a short video featuring Longfellow’s “To the River Charles” and Yolanda Oliveira’s “Clockwork Stream,” students will analyze descriptive language in poem excerpts, then brainstorm and write their own place-based poetry.

## Preparation

Prepare the following:

* Review PowerPoint slides, set up presentation.
* Check that the embedded short film (4 minutes) on Slide 14 plays correctly. Direct link: <https://youtu.be/6N4XUDRdURQ?si=9H8KXtKD2gBNv7cd>
* Set up an easel or other method for creating a class list of brainstormed words.
* Print worksheets for each students:
  + Worksheet #1: Poem Analysis “To the River Charles”
  + Worksheet #2: Poem Analysis “Clockwork Stream”
  + Worksheet #3: Write Your Own Poem

Optional: For additional teacher background on Henry Longfellow, consider viewing this short film prior to the lesson: [Henry W. Longfellow: At Home and In Print](https://www.nps.gov/media/video/view.htm?id=AE17128F-0969-4789-98CC-BC3526E05FD6).

## Procedure

This lesson is made up of two parts, which can be taught as two shorter lessons or a single longer lesson:

1. Poetry on the Charles River: Analyzing Sensory Language
2. Write Your Own Place-Based Poem

### Part 1: Analyzing Sensory Language

Use included PowerPoint presentation throughout the lesson. These presenter notes are also included with the slides.

1. SLIDE 1: Introduce the lesson – students will be listening to, reading, and writing their own poetry about special places.
2. SLIDE 2: One of the poets we’ll meet in this lesson is a high school student from Boston named Yolanda Oliveira. Yolanda says that “Poetry allows you to express yourself, to tell your own story about the things you see and what you feel.”
3. SLIDE 3: The other poet we’ll read today lived in the 1800s. Henry Longfellow (1807-1882) took inspiration from many things – his family, history, his community, travel, literature, and nature. Born in Portland, Maine, Longfellow lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts for much of his adult life.
4. SLIDE 4: Ask - **Who are some poets you’ve heard of? Does anyone have a favorite poem?**
5. SLIDE 5: One of Henry Longfellow’s favorite places was the river near his house – the Charles River. From the window of his study at 105 Brattle Street (now Longfellow House-Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site), Longfellow loved to look out on the Charles River. **Close your eyes and think about your favorite place. How does it feel to be there? What does it look, sound, or smell like?**
6. SLIDE 6: What are adjectives? Adjectives are important words that can help us describe what we see, hear, smell, touch, or taste. They describe a noun (a thing, person, place). Some examples of adjectives in “To the River Charles” include Bright, Deep, Blue, Better, and Long.
7. SLIDE 7: We can use our five senses to describe places. **What are the five senses?** (See, hear, smell, touch, taste)
8. SLIDE 8: Brainstorm words that describe how a river looks. Use adjectives to describe specific parts of the river. **Recommended: create a class list of brainstormed words.** *Examples: bright, shiny, sparkly water, green trees, energetic ducks.*
9. SLIDE 9: Brainstorm words that describe how a river sounds. *Examples: gurgling, loud, quiet, whispering wind.*
10. SLIDE 10: Brainstorm words that describe how a river smells. *Examples: fresh, stinky, fishy, clean.*
11. SLIDE 11: Brainstorm words that describe how a river feels. *Examples: wet, cool, slimy rocks, strong current.*
12. SLIDE 12: Brainstorm words that describe how a river tastes. (Students may need to use their imaginations for this one!) *Examples: refreshing, clean, muddy.*
13. SLIDE 13: Show video. Ask students to listen for parts where you can really imagine what the poet is describing. Direct link: <https://youtu.be/6N4XUDRdURQ?si=9H8KXtKD2gBNv7cd>

Split into groups of 3-4. Hand out **worksheets #1 and/or #2**. (Select one or both poems.)

1. SLIDE 14:
   1. Underline descriptive words. How many of the five senses can you find?
   2. Circle parts where the poet is talking about why they feel connected to this place.

Invite each group to share out several descriptive words and connections to the place. See how many the class can identify, and add them to the descriptive word list.

END POWERPOINT

### Part 2: Write your own poem

In this section, students will identify a place that is special to them, brainstorm descriptive words, and write about a memory or favorite thing to do at their place.

SLIDE 15: A lighthearted example poem – *use if needed, or create your own. The example text can also be removed from the slide.*

Hand out **worksheet #3**. Students can work individually or in pairs. Instructions:

1. Think about a place you love, or have favorite memories of. What special place will you write about?
2. Brainstorm descriptive words for at least three of the five senses. Encourage students to think creatively.
3. Describe a special memory you have in your place, or your favorite thing to do there.
4. Write your poem! Include your descriptive words and a mention of your memory. **Try writing your poem “to” the special place, like Longfellow and Oliveira did.**

**Students their poems aloud to conclude the less.** Take a deep breath, stand up tall, use a big voice, and bravely share your poem with the class. Don’t forget “snaps” for each poet!

## Optional Activities

**Rhyming challenge:** Assign students a rhyme scheme for writing their poems. Longfellow uses a 4-line “ABAB” rhyme scheme in “To the River Charles.” In each group of four lines, the first and third and the second and fourth rhyme.

**Mystery place challenge:** Students write and read their poems to the class without revealing the name or location of their special place. See if the audience can guess the mystery location that inspired the poem!

**Place perspective challenge:** Instead of picking a favorite place, assign students (in small groups, or the whole class) to write poems about places that are familiar to them (the school cafeteria, the playground, etc.) Use the poem worksheet as described above. When students share their poems, build empathy by pointing out both the similarities and differences in the way students experience the shared place. Make a running list of all the descriptive words used to describe the shared place.

## Additional resources

[Education | The Poetry Foundation](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/education)

[Searchable Database of Longfellow Poems - HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW](https://www.hwlongfellow.org/poems_front.php)

[Longfellow At Home and In Print - Longfellow House Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site (U.S. National Park Service)](https://www.nps.gov/long/learn/historyculture/longfellow-at-home-and-in-print.htm)