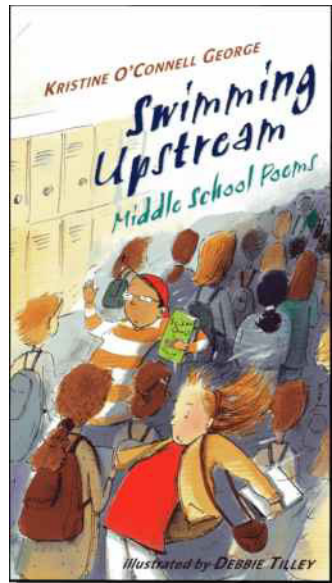


# Swimming Upstream

Middle School Poems



**Companion Guide  
Poetry-Writing Activities**

**by Kristine O'Connell George**

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## TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Numerous school visits, convention workshops, poetry readings, and book signings have given me the opportunity to read poems by student writers from across the country. The poems that I remember—the poems that “crackle” and have a genuine “writer’s voice”—are almost always based on students’ personal experiences. So I designed this guide to give students opportunities to write poems that mine their personal and middle school experiences. Not only is middle school a “high-interest” topic but it also allows for direct observations and personal reactions.

### GRADE LEVELS

Grades 6, 7, and 8

### WRITING PROCESS

The activities in this guide will not only help students write original poems but also address writing skills and some of the key elements of the writing process. The brevity of poetry allows students an opportunity to practice the different steps of the writing process—from brainstorming and pre-writing through several revisions to a final polish—in a relatively short period of time. Students who may have difficulty applying writing process concepts to a long passage or essay may very well succeed when working on a poem. The goal of this guide is to have students concentrate on thinking critically and writing concise and meaningful poetry, so the writing activities are designed to have students write free verse rather than rhymed poems.

### WORKSHOP APPROACH

Another goal of this guide is to help students experience how writers work. Therefore, the activities include writing workshops: Students share their work in progress with small groups of their peers and offer feedback and encouragement to one another. (You might want to mention to your students that not only do published writers get feedback from their editors but many writers seek advice on their writing from peers and critique groups.)

### TIME

In addition to feedback and encouragement, all writers need *time* to reflect and gather ideas. Therefore, some of the activities are structured in 45-minute sessions and may extend over two class periods or require students to work on their poems at home. While some students may be able to write an acceptable poem in a single class period, most students benefit from having enough time to let their poems “simmer” so they can think more deeply about their writing.

I hope you and your students enjoy *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*. If you would like to share other ways you discover to use these poems in your classroom, please e-mail me at [KGeorge123@aol.com](mailto:KGeorge123@aol.com). I would be delighted to add your ideas to my web site with a copyright designation to protect your contribution.

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

Using middle school as a framework offers immediate topics for young writers to explore: self-discovery, peer relationships, and the unique challenges and opportunities middle school presents.

### WRITING ACTIVITY 1: Poetry Pre-Writing

The practice of changing classrooms and the size of middle school campuses often leave middle school students feeling somewhat anonymous. It's not surprising then that many experiment with and "try on" new identities. What better time to give yourself a new name and a fresh identity than when most of your classmates and all of your teachers don't know "who" you were before middle school?

In searching for that single word or concise phrase to describe their personality, students will begin to experience how powerful a phrase or single word can be. Arranging words that describe the personal qualities related to their new names offers students an opportunity to explore how the placement of words on a page can communicate meaning. Writing acrostic poems in the extension activity offers further opportunity to experiment with using language succinctly.

**Note:** The page number of each poem cited from *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems* is enclosed in parentheses immediately following the poem title.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*
- Writer's notebooks or writing supplies for each student
- Art paper, scissors, and glue for each student

### ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

1. Read "Identity" (p. 14) to your students and lead a discussion on the importance of names. Some questions students might discuss are:
  - Why do you think the narrator in this poem wants to choose a new name?
  - What guesses have you made about someone's personality based on that person's name?
2. Ask students to brainstorm their impressions of the personal qualities that might be associated with the following names: Shadow Dancer, Cheetah, or Quartz. For example, "Cheetah" might include personal qualities such as "swift runner," "dresses to blend in with the surroundings," "hunter," or "nocturnal."

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3. Invite students to jot down new names they might like for themselves. Encourage them to consider names that might define something about them or names that reflect their personal beliefs or passions.
4. Ask students to list the personal qualities they feel their new name projects.
5. Have students cut out the words describing each quality and use them to make a visual collage. For example, students might experiment with scale or arrange their words in a pinwheel or as a crossword.

## **EXTENSION**

### **Acrostic Poems**

Invite students to write acrostic poems using their new names. See “S N O B” (p. 41) from *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems* as an example of an acrostic poem. Acrostic poems are discussed in more depth at: [www.kristinegeorge.com/poetrypower.htm](http://www.kristinegeorge.com/poetrypower.htm).

## WRITING ACTIVITY 2: Character Development

To create characters that come alive for their readers, writers search for those interesting and “quirky” traits that will help define a character’s personality. Writing poems about an interesting character—and discovering those defining traits—helps students understand the importance of the writing adage: “Show, don’t tell.” Students will begin to see how muscular verbs and concrete actions define their characters more effectively than over-used adjectives such as *nice*, *pretty*, and *amazing*.

### WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*
- Writer’s notebooks or writing supplies for each student

### ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

#### Session 1

1. Read aloud “Costume Day” (p. 36), “Factoids” (p. 49), “Thursday” (p. 51), and “Zach’s Watch” (p. 56) to your students.
2. Ask individual students to also read these poems aloud to the class. Discuss the interesting “quirks” that make Kori, Zach, and Jaleesa unique personalities.
3. Have students consider and discuss how they would describe an interesting character from their own lives. (Students should *not* choose any of their classmates to avoid any possibility of inadvertently injuring tender feelings.)
4. Make two columns on the board. Label one “Adjectives” and the other column “Actions.” Ask students to give examples of details they might use to describe an interesting character. Write their descriptions on the board in the appropriate column. Ask students to identify which descriptions from the two lists are most powerful and would catch their attention as a reader and help bring a character to life.

#### Example:

Adjective: *bratty*

Action: My little brother hid my notebook and made me late.

Adjective: *strong*

Action: Aunt Tilda moves her refrigerator by herself in order to mop behind it.

5. Have students choose a character from their own lives and brainstorm actions that describe their character. Invite individual students to share their preliminary ideas with the class.

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## Session 2

1. Give students a short time to continue brainstorming supporting information and details about their character.
2. Have students write a rough draft of a poem describing their character. Encourage students to read their rough draft aloud to themselves, making changes as needed.
3. Once students have written rough drafts, organize the students into small workshop groups to read their drafts aloud and get feedback from their peers.

**Note:** It may take more than one class period for students to finish their poems. Some students may wish to continue to work on their poems at home or during free time.

4. Collect finished poems in a class anthology titled: "Interesting Characters I Have Known."

## EXTENSION

### Characters I Wish I Knew

Invite students to visualize someone they wish they knew or would like to meet. It might be a new friend they'd like to have or an inspiring personality from the world of science, government, art, etc. For example, a poem about Eleanor Roosevelt or Vincent Van Gogh might begin "I wish I knew you/ was standing next to you/ when you ..."

Following the format above, have students write poems with a working title of "I Wish I Knew You ...". Have students concentrate on describing this person using actions rather than adjectives.

## WRITING ACTIVITY 3: Supporting Details

Writers are collectors. They gather scraps of language, snippets of overheard conversations, phrases, captivating first lines, and anything else that intrigues them. A working writer's notebook is a hodgepodge of ideas. Many of these scribbled-down notes won't go anywhere while others just might be the start of a poem or story. In this activity students will be gathering details and then sorting them to choose the most interesting and powerful to use in a poem. The multi-session structure of this activity gives the students an opportunity to experience how having ample time to gather supporting details will make their final poem stronger and richer.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*
- Ten to fifteen 3x5 note cards per student
- Writer's notebooks or writing supplies for each student

### ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

#### Session 1

1. Read aloud "So Much Better Than I Expected" (p.45) to your students. Then have students read the poem aloud "round robin" style with each student reading a line.
2. Discuss how we sometimes have hours, days, or weeks where it seems as if everything goes right. (You might wish to share some examples from your own life.) Have students brainstorm some of the "highs" (small or large) they've experienced recently that added up to that "levitate-off-the-planet" feeling.
  - Made it to all of my classes on time without getting lost
  - Met a new friend
  - Got in lunch line early enough to get pizza before it ran out
3. Have students begin a list of these "highs" in their writer's notebook or on notebook paper. Rather than be restricted to a single day, their lists can encompass "highs" they've experienced over a longer period of time.
4. Every two or three days, prompt students to update their list of "highs." Encourage students to add to their list whenever they develop new ideas.

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## Session 2

1. After you feel students have collected enough ideas, have the students write each idea clearly, and with as few extraneous words as possible, on a single 3 x 5 note card. Encourage students to choose only their strongest ideas.
2. Tell students to shuffle and rearrange their note cards until they find an order they like. Students will then have a scaffold of ideas on which they can build their poem. They can use “So Much Better Than I Expected” as a template or find their own unique way of organizing their ideas.
3. Ask students to write rough drafts of “levitate-off-the-planet poems” using the ideas they’ve generated. Encourage students to read their drafts aloud to themselves as they revise.
4. Once students have written a rough draft, organize them into their writing workshop groups to read their drafts aloud and to receive peer feedback.
5. Have students revise and polish their drafts into a final version.

**Note:** It may take more than one class period for students to finish their poems. Some may wish to continue to work on their poems at home or during free time.

6. Post your students’ “levitate-off-the-planet” poems in the classroom for students (and parents) to enjoy.

## EXTENSION

### Achievement Poems: I Did It!

Middle School is a time of learning many new things, conquering fears, and experiencing personal triumphs. Read aloud “Long Jump” (p. 43), “Science Projects” (67), and “Band Concert” (p. 74). Ask students to consider their own personal triumphs and write a poem about their successes. “I Did It!” can be used as an organizing concept, as the first line, or as a title for their poem.

## WRITING ACTIVITY 4: A Poetry Quest

The poems in *Swimming Upstream* are like snapshots of individual moments in the narrator's life at school. A moment of time captured in a handful of words is the essence of poetry. This distillation is also the hallmark of other art forms from drawing to collage to photography. A middle school campus, with its energy and kaleidoscope of images, is a rich resource for young writers. The trick, however, is to get students to slow down long enough to look closely, to focus, and to discover those all-important details. This activity helps young writers hone their observation skills so they can capture meaningful images to share with their readers.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*
- Photographic equipment or art supplies for each team
- Writer's notebooks or writing supplies for each student

### ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

#### Session 1

1. Read the following poems aloud to your students: "Late" (p. 11), "Changing Classes" (p. 15), "Hall Pass" (p. 34), "School Dance" (p. 47), and "Spring Sparrows" (p. 70). Ask students to visualize the settings in these poems as they listen.
2. Brainstorm with your students about what they see around them on their campus that intrigues them:
  - A tennis shoe up in the tree?
  - The crazy van one of the teachers drives?
  - The trampled dirt path where students cut through the grass?
3. Assign students to "detective teams" of three to four students. If you have access to cameras (digital, Polaroid, etc.), assign a camera to each team. If you don't have photographic equipment, give each team a pad of unlined paper and several pencils and ask them to sketch their observations. Be sure team members understand that they should take turns recording what they see and that all team members should contribute to the project.
4. Have students spend 10–15 minutes walking around campus recording their observations. If possible, have team members meet again briefly during lunch or before or after school to continue collecting observations.

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## Session 2

1. Make a bulletin board of the students' collected "visual observations" and give students time to study the images.
2. Invite students to choose one intriguing image and write a poem about it. (Students do not have to choose an image from their team—that's part of the fun—seeing what their fellow student-detectives have discovered.)
3. Once students have written their rough draft, allow ample time for students to work in small writing workshop groups, reading their drafts aloud and receiving feedback.
4. Have students finalize their poem.

**Note:** Students may need an additional class period or time at home to finish their poems.

## EXTENSION

### Visual Art

Please see "Art as Muse" at [www.kristinegeorge.com/poetry\\_power.htm](http://www.kristinegeorge.com/poetry_power.htm) for suggestions for writing poetry in response to art.

### Locker Poems

Ah, the all-important locker! Invite students to brainstorm about their lockers and to think creatively. Questions to jump start creativity include the following:

- Who had their locker last year?
- What did the locker do over the summer?
- What is that locker thinking about?
- What is the most interesting thing they've put in their locker?

Ask students to share their ideas and collaborate on a class poem entitled: "That Locker." Students might want to consider writing a "mask poem" in the voice of the locker. Mask poems are discussed in more detail at [www.kristinegeorge.com/teachers\\_guide\\_old\\_elm\\_speaks.htm](http://www.kristinegeorge.com/teachers_guide_old_elm_speaks.htm).

## WRITING ACTIVITY 5: Finding Inspiration in Personal Experiences

Writers often draw on childhood memories for inspiration. Middle school students still have one foot in childhood, so capturing memories of their younger selves is a high-interest (and often hilarious) writing activity. In this activity students will be writing a poem about a personal experience and experimenting with using first- and third-person points of view. Further, writing about personal experiences allows students to see how powerful poetry can be when it is about real people and real events.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*
- Writer's notebooks or writing supplies for each student

### ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

#### Session 1

1. Read "Pole Song" (p. 39). Reread the poem "round robin" style.
2. Invite students to share memories of themselves when they were younger. Jot their ideas on the board. Students' responses to this activity are often poignant: The student who had an imaginary giraffe. The student who was convinced that the bathtub drain was treacherous and might swallow a small child.
3. At the conclusion of the class discussion, have students choose an idea based on a personal experience and brainstorm supporting details. Ask each student to write a rough draft of a poem using the first-person point of view.
4. Next, ask students to write a second rough draft about the same topic or idea using third-person and using words like "he," "she," and "they." Students should be encouraged to work on both of their rough drafts at home and to read their work aloud as they revise.

#### Session 2

1. Have several students volunteer to read their two versions out loud. Ask students to analyze which version they felt was strongest—first-person or third-person—and explain why.
  - What changes did they make when they changed point of view?
  - Did they add details?
  - Did they alter the structure of their poem?
  - Did they "see" the event they are describing differently when they wrote it in the third person?

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2. Next, have students read both rough drafts aloud in their writing workshop groups and get feedback. Ask students to determine which voice (first person or third person) they plan to use for their final draft.
3. Allow students ample time to polish their poems into a final version.  
**Note:** It may take more than one class period for students to finish their poems. Some may wish to continue to work on their poems at home or during free time.
4. Collect finished poems in a class anthology titled: “When I Was a Little Kid...”

## **EXTENSION**

### **Sage Advice**

One voice that is often overlooked by students is second person. Yet poems written in this voice are often quite powerful. Invite your students to write a poem offering advice to an upcoming middle schooler as if they were speaking directly to that future student.

## WRITING ACTIVITY 6: The Reading Connection

One of the most powerful tools a writer uses is reading, and most writers are voracious readers. Not only do writers get ideas from what they read, but many of them have favorite authors they use as “muses” and read for inspiration.

This does *not* mean that writers copy from one another. Far from it. However, a good poem, story, or narrative passage often triggers memories and impressions from our own lives. Have you ever noticed that sometimes your mind will start to wander when you’re reading a poem or story? If so, stop for a minute and pay close attention to what you’re thinking about. These “reading ideas” are often the sparks that inspire our own poems or stories. In this activity students will be reading (and listening) for meaning and making personal connections with poetry to generate ideas for their own original poems.

### WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*
- Writer’s notebooks or writing supplies for each student

### ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

#### Session 1

1. Have students take turns reading aloud a selection of poems from *Swimming Upstream*. Choose poems that offer a variety of settings, emotions, and events.
2. Reread aloud the same selection of poems to the class. Ask students to listen and jot down the ideas and personal connections that hearing these poems evokes.
3. Invite students to discuss some of the ideas they generated from the reading. Dynamic discussions may trigger students to make additional associations. Ask students to jot these new ideas down as well.

**Note:** Most students will generate ideas based on their own middle school experiences. However, this type of “free association” may lead some students to go in different directions and consider a variety of topics for their poems.

4. Each student should now have several ideas or connections based on the poems and class discussion. Ask students to choose their strongest and most intriguing idea and spend a few minutes brainstorming supporting details before starting their rough draft.

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**Session 2**

1. Ask students to continue working on their rough drafts. Encourage students to read their work aloud to themselves as they revise.
2. Organize students into small writing workshop groups to share their drafts. When students are ready, have them write a final, polished draft.

**Note:** It may take more than one class period for students to finish their poems. Some may wish to continue to work on their poems at home or during free time.

3. Collect finished poems in a class anthology titled: "Reflections from Middle School."

**EXTENSION****Where did you go?**

"Kori" (p. 20) and "P. E. Locker" (p. 71) deal with a person who has slipped out of the narrator's life. This is a common occurrence both in life as well as middle school, where a student mixes with ever-changing groups of fellow students. Invite students to recall similar incidents from their own lives and to write poems about what happened. The first line of the poem might be: *Where Did He/She/They Go?* Students may also wish to pretend that they are writing a letter to the missing person and use the second-person point of view. In that case, they can use *Where Did You Go?* as an organizing concept, as first line, or as the title for their poem.

## WRITING ACTIVITY 7: Free Writing by Candlelight

Young writers often blossom if given the opportunity to choose their own topics and to experience an altered classroom environment. For example, there is something magical about sitting in a classroom lit only by flickering candles. The candlelight feels private and students are often able to slip into their own imaginations.

In this activity students generate and develop ideas while experiencing an open-ended writing opportunity. Free writing is a powerful tool that will help students tap into their imaginations and unconscious minds. The topics generated during free writing are often deeply meaningful.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- *Swimming Upstream: Middle School Poems*
- Writer's notebooks or writing supplies for each student
- Votive candles in candle holders set in a shallow pan of water. (Can't be too safe!)

### ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

1. Light the candle(s) and turn off the overhead lights. Read aloud "Free Writing" (p. 68).
2. Ask the students to simply write whatever comes to mind. Students are to write continuously, they are not to stop, erase, or read what they have already written. If a student seems "stuck" suggest he/she begin by describing the candle flame or write about a personal association with candles such as a birthday party. Length of "free writing" will vary; use your judgment by observing students.
3. Give a two-minute warning before turning on the lights to allow students who are still actively writing to finish their thoughts. Ask students to remain quiet once you turn the lights on.
4. Discuss the activity and have students consider how they can create opportunities for free writing in their daily lives.
5. Have students circle areas of their free writing that are particularly interesting to them. Students may choose a single word or, perhaps, an entire passage.
6. Ask students to volunteer, if they feel comfortable doing so, which ideas they circled. (Sometimes the results of this activity are intensely private, and students should not feel that they must share their ideas with either their teacher or classmates.)

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7. Each student may have more than one strong idea generated by this free writing activity. Give students the option to choose one of their ideas to further develop into a poem.

**Note:** Writing a polished poem using an idea generated in this activity will require additional time.

## **EXTENSION**

### **A Room of My Own**

Virginia Woolf needed “a room of my own,” and students often need guidance to help them create their own physical “writing space” at home. Lead a discussion with your students about the components they might need for a personal writing environment, such as a clear writing surface, good light, quiet, and privacy. Invite students to create their own “writing space” at home and to describe it to the class or their writing workshop group.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For your reference, some of my favorite books about teaching writing and poetry are listed below.

### FOR TEACHERS

- Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Boynton/Cook, 1998.
- Calkins, Luck McCormick and Shelley Harwayne. *Living Between the Lines*. Heinemann, 1992.
- Dunning, Steven and William Stafford. *Getting the Knack: 20 Poetry Writing Exercises*. NCTE, 1992.
- Fletcher, Ralph. *Breathing In, Breathing Out: Keeping a Writer's Notebook*. Heinemann, 1996.
- and Joann Portalupi. *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*. Heinemann, 2001.
- Harste, Jerome C., Kathy G. Shorte. with Carolyn Burke. *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*. Heinemann, 1996.
- Harwayne, Shelley. *Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature into the Writing Workshop*. Heinemann, 1993.
- . *Writing Through Childhood: Rethinking Process and Product*. Heinemann, 2001.
- Heard, Georgia. *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*. Heinemann, 1998.
- . *For the Good of the Earth and Sun: Teaching Poetry*. Heinemann, 1989.
- Hopkins, Lee Bennett. *Pass the Poetry, Please!*. HarperCollins, 1998.

### FOR YOUNG WRITERS

- Apelt, Kathi. *Just People & Paper/Pen/Poem: A Young Writer's Way to Begin*. Absey & Co., 1997.
- . *Poems from Homeroom: A Writer's Place to Start*. Henry Holt, 2002.
- Fletcher, Ralph. *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You*. Avon Camelot, 1996.
- . *Poetry Matters: Writing a Poem from the Inside Out*. HarperCollins, 2001.
- Janeczko, Paul. *How to Write Poetry (Scholastic Guides)*. Scholastic Reference, 1999.
- . *Favorite Poetry Lessons*. Scholastic, 1999.
- . *Poetry Writing from A to Z: A Guide for Young Writers*. Atheneum, 1994.
- . *Seeing the Blue Between: Advice and Inspirations for Young Poets*. Candlewick, 2002.
- Livingston, Myra Cohn. *Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry*. HarperCollins, 1991.

**NOTE:** Please see [www.kristinegeorge.com/poetry\\_book\\_shop.htm](http://www.kristinegeorge.com/poetry_book_shop.htm) for additional titles.