This exercise uses visual stimuli as the basis for writing poems. In my workshops I have used hundred-year-old photographic portraits of Native Americans in full traditional dress to inspire emotional and thoughtful responses.

You could use any postcards, art or photos, and vary the prompts on the accompanying sheet to describe the pictures in interesting ways. Let the students choose a portrait to work on, either individually or in small groups of two to four.

**Developing empathy**
Tell the students they can choose to imagine themselves as the person in the photo, as the photographer documenting a disappearing people for history, or as modern-day descendants of the people depicted, looking at their own history.

**Considering imagery**
To get the students to think about using imagery throughout the poem, and truly think themselves into the world of the portrait, give out copies of the sheet attached and ask them to write their responses into each section.

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**Drafting verse**
To create a poem based on these responses, the students can put them into any order they like. They can write them down verbatim, on successive lines, which usually works best in terms of vivid imagery, or by including every image/response in a poem that they create by adding lines, making it rhyme, making it into an acrostic, or whatever they prefer.

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**POET’S TIP**
Before you write, get the group on their feet to do something physical, to get them energised.
POETRY FROM PORTRAITS

1. What time of year is it (season), and what time of day (morning, evening, midnight, etc)?

2. Imagine the world, the environment of the portrait. Describe it in as much detail as you can.

3. Pick a colour, either imagined (if it’s a black-and-white portrait), or from the surroundings. Describe it, and be specific: for example, ‘as red as...’?

4. Pick a sound that you think of as you look at the portrait, and describe it. Be specific. It can be an imaginary sound, or a sound no one usually hears.

5. Pick a smell. Again, it can be realistic, or unexpected.

6. Pick a taste.

7. Pick a texture – describe how it feels when you touch it.

8. Pick an emotion – use a simile to describe it, e.g. you feel ‘as elated as...’? ‘as anxious as...’? etc.


NAME: