How to bake a poet

By Ben Bransfield
Teacher Trailblazer

This lesson plan involves exploring some of the ideas in Sophia Carney’s poem ‘How to be a patriot’, which was a winning poem of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2015. The activities in this plan could be used in one lesson or spread across a series of lessons to inspire poetry writing in the classroom through individual and group work.

The activities use features of the poem’s unusual structure and ideas around its central theme to get students using concrete images to explore abstract concepts. Students will draft their own poem before reading Sophia’s poem. Their writing should inform their understanding of the winning piece’s structure, and also allow them to reflect on their feelings towards their own country.

Before reaching the ‘Reading the Poem’ section, and introducing it to students, make sure you have read Sophia’s poem and the accompanying Teacher’s Notes (below).

 Topics at a glance
• Politics
• List poems
• Imagery
• Structure

Pair work
Give students one minute to write a list of things that are normally sold with accompanying instructions.

Ask pairs to identify their smallest and largest examples (hayfever tablets, a car) or any objects that they think are too obvious to need instructions (a toothbrush). Compare this list with another pair.

Whole class discussion
• Who might write the instructions for the things we buy and own?
• How can we be sure they are reliable? Why do you think they are produced?
• When should we follow instructions and when might we ignore them?
• Where could we look for guidance on ‘How to...’ do something we are unsure of or ‘How to...’ behave in a particular way?
Students may benefit from seeing the following instructions and examples. You may wish to guide the class along, encouraging all to move onto the next stage at a similar time.

Solo activity
Choose one of the following everyday tasks, or one of your own:
• How to bake a cake
• How to ride a bike
• How to have a shower
• How to read a book
• How to play a guitar

Write instructions for your task broken down into five steps. Each step must be written as a proper sentence, starting with a command word (a verb in the imperative). For example:

How to bake a cake
1. Pre-heat the oven to gas mark 4.
2. Measure ingredients carefully into a bowl.
3. Mix flour, sugar, butter, and eggs with a whisk.
4. Pour the mixture into two non-stick tins.
5. Place them in the oven until golden brown.

Then choose one of the following things to be or one of your own:
• How to be a teacher
• How to be a parrot
• How to be an immigrant
• How to be a flag
• How to be a song

Again, break it down into five steps but this time try to be a bit more imaginative. Each step must still be a proper sentence, starting with a command word, but this time you might need to give more thought to the order of your steps.

For example:

How to be a parrot
1. Hatch out of an egg and stay in the nest.
2. Grow bright coloured wings and feathers.
3. Develop a passion for peanuts.
4. Learn to copy what people say.
5. Peck at mirrors.

You now need to split every step on your two lists into two parts. Decide where you are going to split each step by drawing a line. It could be one of the following:

Hatch out of an egg | and stay in the nest. or,
Hatch out | of an egg and stay in the nest. or,
Hatch out of an egg and stay | in the nest.

Once you have drawn all your lines, look at the first step on each of your two lists. Swap a part of the sentence from the first list with a part of the sentence from the second list. Add in any small words to complete your new sentences. Write the new lists out.
For example:

1. Pre-heat the oven to hatch out of an egg.
   1. Stay in the nest at gas mark 4.

Now work through the rest of your lists. Continue swapping the parts of the lines, including the titles of your lists, until you have two completely new instruction lists. For example:

How to bake a parrot
1. Pre-heat the oven to hatch out of an egg.
2. Grow bright-coloured wings into a bowl.
3. Mix flour, sugar, butter, and peanuts.
4. Pour the mixture into what people say.
5. Place them in mirrors.

How to be a cake
1. Stay in the nest at gas mark 4.
2. Measure ingredients carefully and feathers.
3. Develop a passion for eggs with a whisk.
4. Learn to copy into two non-stick tins.
5. Peck at the oven until golden brown.

Pair discussion
In pairs, share one of your new lists. What is more imaginative and powerful about your new lists and what do they make you think about?

How might including an abstract noun in the title alter its effect (e.g. ‘How to be in love’; ‘How to bake fear’; ‘How to be a dream; ‘How to play envy’)

Share your lists – your two new poems – with the group.

Discussion points:
- Each sentence of these poems is in the second person, i.e. directly addressing the reader. Does this give the poems a particular feel?
- Is the reader more involved?

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educationadmin@poetrysociety.org.uk poetrysociety.org.uk
Language clusters
Sophia’s poem includes many sets of words with clear clusters of imagery. To explore these, cut up copies of ‘Worksheet 2: Language clusters’ and ask students in pairs to arrange words around the relevant capitalised headings. Do any words fit into more than one category?

Students walk around the room silently to see which word clusters other pairs decided on.

Read ‘How to be a patriot’ aloud to the class, slowly. If you can, try to hold a minute’s silence at the end: give the room space to let the poem settle.

Now give each student a copy of Sophia’s poem so they can see it on the page.

In pairs, ask students to read the poem aloud at a similar speed, changing speaker at the end of each sentence.

Ask students to consider how far Sophia’s poem supports the definition of patriotism.

- Ask the students if there are any individual words that they do not understand. Before clarifying definitions, ask them if they can use the surrounding context to imagine what the difficult or unusual words might mean – or what that word feels like from the way it sounds.

- Ask students to write down on a sticky note how the poem makes them feel, or what it makes them think about. Ask students to place their sticky notes next to the part of the poem that most closely matches their feelings about patriotism. If projecting the poem onto the board, the whole class can come up.

- Introduce the ‘Background information’ (below) to students. Does this make them view the poem in any different way?

- Allocate the five sections to different groups. Ask each group to think carefully about ways in which their section engages with the title of the poem, illuminating what a ‘patriot’ might be.

- When groups are feeding back their ideas, use the Teacher’s Notes to supplement anything they might have overlooked, encouraging students to probe deeper into the words and their multiple associations.

- With a KS5 class, you might prefer to give each group (with or without the corresponding section of the teacher’s notes) time to prepare a mini two minute lesson on their section of the poem to deliver to the whole class.
This could be for a subsequent lesson or a creative and independent homework task.

Tell students that their two list poems were warm-ups to a longer piece of writing that will explore their feelings towards their own country.

As a group, you could explore possible titles that might reflect current anxieties (‘How to be homeless’; ‘How to be yourself’; ‘How to be gay’; ‘How to be an extremist’; ‘How to be the National Health Service’; ‘How to be a liar’; ‘How to be a teenager’). Similarly, students might like to develop ideas of ‘patriotism’ by responding to one of the ‘Quotations for Discussion’.

Students create a list of three places that best evoke feelings about their own country and create a ‘language cluster’ for each of them.

Using Sophia’s poem as a model, students can now work with their own title and ‘language clusters’ to draft a five-step poem with a second person address and beginning each sentence with imperative commands.

Think carefully about line breaks so each line corresponds with a complete unit of thought (a line of poetry might carry the weight of a prose paragraph).

Have a celebratory reading and share your own effort with the class.

Enter the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award

Sophia’s poem was a winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2015. Now your students are writing their own poetry they can enter the competition themselves.

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award is the most prestigious award for writers aged 11-17. It is an annual competition that welcomes poems on any theme and entry is completely free.

Since it began in 1998, the Award has kick-started the career of some of today’s most exciting new voices. Past winners include Sarah Howe, Helen Mort and Caroline Bird.

Winners receive a fantastic range of prizes, including mentoring, a residential Arvon writing course, Poetry Society membership and books. The Poetry Society also continues to support winners’ development with performance, publication and internship opportunities.

Find out more and enter your students’ work at foyleyoungpoets.org
How to be a patriot

By Sophia Carney

A winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2015

1. Plate your pain with reinforced steel;
fit it with tire treads and arm
it with the revolver you keep
in the kitchen cabinet next to the Coco Pops.

2. Exhibit your pride;
curate it like a museum display.
Soak the constitution in formaldehyde
that sticks the imperatives to the page.
Program the X-ray machine at the door to record
the shade of the visitors’ skin
in hexadecimal.

3. Press the flag flat.
Turn it to a freeze-frame
between two Perspex sheets labelled
DO NOT TOUCH.

4. Neglect to mention the pixels of
blood that appear
under UV light and human scrutiny.

5. Freedom is a word that begins and
ends on your display case. The amendments
to its meaning read
like the list of ingredients in a Big Mac.

Glossary

*tire* – the American spelling of ‘tyre’
*formaldehyde* – a chemical used as an antiseptic or as a preservative of biological specimens.
*imperatives* – command words (often verbs used in the imperative form to make commands or requests, for example: ‘Go! Run! Listen!’)
*hexadecimal* – a numeral system with a base of 16; used in mathematics, computing and as a form of cataloguing.
Observations and discussion points to guide teaching on the poem’s five sections.

Section 1

- What are the effects of combining images of weaponry and armour with a domestic home?
- Clarify that “plate” here is an imperative verb and not a noun. We can visualise plated armour, but what might plated “pain” suggest in this context?
- The steel is “reinforced” to withstand impact, to protect against physical pain inflicted by others. Does the armour also seal over and hide a different kind of “pain” already within the patriot? What might be the root cause of such pain? Why might it be dangerous to cover over internal hurt and not to feel?
- Notice how close the dangerous weapon is to the children’s cereal; does the speaker condemn this irresponsible behaviour, or does the reader? Notice the spelling of “tire”: could we be in America, where many citizens have the right to keep and bear firearms?

Section 2

- A “museum display” is a public space to inform and educate. What might an exhibit of “pride” look like? Is history ever presented objectively to us and does “curate” suggest a more sinister, selective view of past events? Compare the effects of abstract nouns (“pride”, “pain”) so far.
- What visual does this second sentence prompt? After checking the glossary, and background information on the US Constitution, have students’ ideas altered?
- Unlike the “Coco Pops” that turn milk brown, the “formaldehyde” stops ink fading from its page, preserving its instructions. Does the speaker seem to believe these instructions will be followed just because they have been preserved?
- Mention the “imperatives” (“Plate”, “fit”, “arm”, “exhibit”, “curate”, “soak”) in the poem so far; is a pattern emerging to where they appear?
- For the third sentence, discuss the (dubious) grounds for national surveillance and the right to privacy. Could this be a dystopian future where museum security scanners have been replaced by bone-scanning, colour-recording machines? What do students find suspicious about this data gathering? How do “skin shade” and “visitors” connect with the poem’s title?

Section 3

- The flag is to be pressed (ironed) free of creases; show an image of a US military funeral where the coffin’s flag is meticulously folded twelve times. What ideas does this provoke?
- Does the “freeze-frame” suggest the flag has now been suspended mid-flight? Show an image of the US Marine Corps War Memorial (Arlington, VA); discuss the flag’s symbolism here.
- How does the capitalized warning distance the “visitors” from the exhibit? What might this suggest about trust, and how the values represented by a flag might not be accessible to all?
- Can students think of particular flags that provoke strong reactions now, and why?
Section 4
- What effect do these anonymous “blood” specks have on this poem and why might a “patriot” be inclined to “neglect to mention” them? A digital microscope’s “pixels” and “UV light” evoke a forensic crime scene that is at odds with what can be seen by the naked eye in a museum exhibit.
- What does the speaker imply lies beneath the surface of “patriotism”? Why should we scrutinize?

Section 5
- Does opening with another abstract noun, rather than the imperative we are expecting, lend “Freedom” a commanding and energized force? If the “word” “begins and ends on [the] display case”, has “freedom” become nothing more than a museum curiosity? What are students’ thoughts on freedom “ending”?
- Ask students if they have ever read the small print on a Big Mac carton: why don’t we, and what might this suggest about our attitude to consumption and responsibility? How does the brand of the ‘Big Mac’ suggest patriotism today?

Thoughts after reading
- How does the second person address affect the reader’s experience of the poem?
- What does the imperative mood contribute to the text overall?
- How might the first five amendments link to the poem’s structure?
- Does the poem’s impact overall suggest that being a “patriot” is a desirable thing?
- Which words or lines best indicate the speaker’s tone and why?

Background information
The United States Constitution is the supreme law of the land in the United States of America. When its seven articles were signed in 1787, it established America’s national government and fundamental laws, and guaranteed certain basic rights for its citizens. Since the Constitution came into force in 1789, it has been amended twenty-seven times to expand on civil rights protections or to modify government procedures. It is the shortest written constitution in force and its five pages of parchment are located in the National Archives, in Washington, D. C.

The First Five Amendments
The First Amendment stops the government from creating laws which restrict religious freedom and freedom of speech.

The Second Amendment protects “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms”.

The Third Amendment stops soldiers from staying in private homes during peace time without the owners’ consent.

The Fourth Amendment protects “right of the people to be secure in their persons”, and searches needing good cause.

The Fifth Amendment means people can only be held for committing a crime if they have been indicted in the right way by police. It also puts in place due process.
Worksheet 1: Quotations for discussion

Patriotism is supporting your country all the time, and your government when it deserves it.

– Mark Twain

Heroism on command, senseless violence, and all the loathsome nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism – how passionately I hate them!

– Albert Einstein

Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.

– Samuel Johnson

Patriotism is as fierce as a fever, pitiless as the grave, blind as a stone, and irrational as a headless hen.

– Ambrose Bierce

I was summoned by my country, whose voice I can never hear but with veneration and love.

– George Washington

Patriotism demands the ability to feel shame as much as to feel pride.

– Anne-Marie Slaughter

To abolish war it is necessary to abolish patriotism, and to abolish patriotism it is necessary first to understand that it is an evil. Tell people that patriotism is bad and most will reply ‘Yes, bad patriotism is bad, but mine is good patriotism.’

– Leo Tolstoy

Patriotism is not a short and frenzied outburst of emotion but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.

– Adlai Stevenson

Thinking men and women the world over are beginning to realize that patriotism is too narrow and limited a conception to meet the necessities of our time.

– Emma Goldman

Patriotism means to stand by the country. It does not mean to stand by the president.

– Theodore Roosevelt

The best cure for patriotism is carefully studying history and the best cure for religion is studying the scriptures.

– Alishba Zarmeen

Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it.

– George Bernard Shaw

Patriotism is the willingness to kill and be killed for trivial reasons.

– Bertrand Russell

You’re not supposed to be so blind with patriotism that you can’t face reality. Wrong is wrong no matter who does it or who says it.

– Malcolm X

Patriotism is the virtue of the vicious.

– Oscar Wilde
Worksheet 2: Language clusters

**COMMANDS**

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<th>Exhibit</th>
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<td>Program</td>
<td>Press</td>
<td>Turn</td>
<td>Do Not Touch</td>
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<td>Neglect</td>
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**MACHINERY**

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<td>UV light</td>
<td>Tire treads</td>
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**PRESERVATION**

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<th>Human Labelled</th>
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**COUNTRY**

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**CONSUMERISM**

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**VALUES**

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