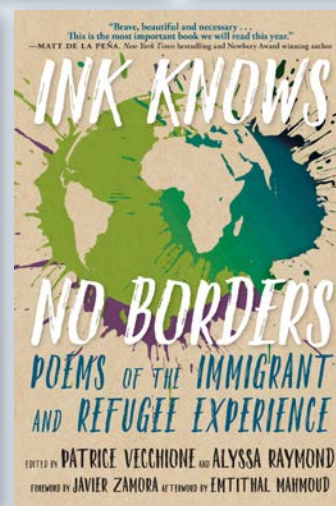
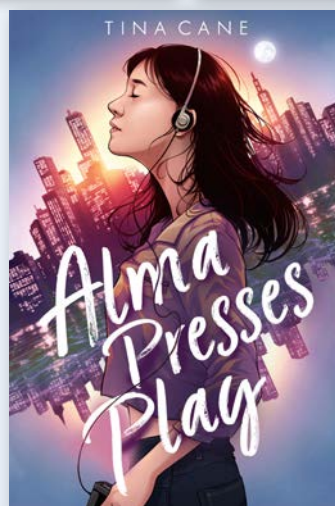
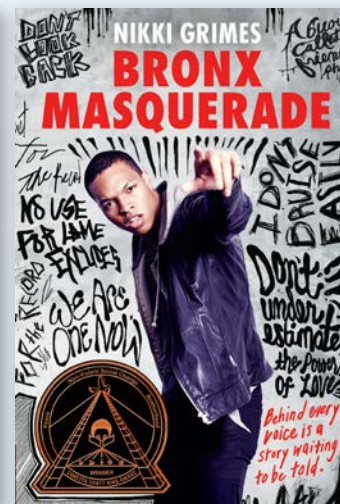
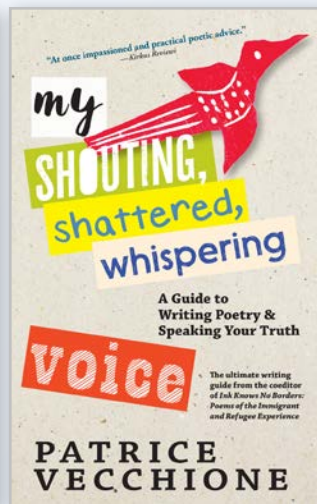
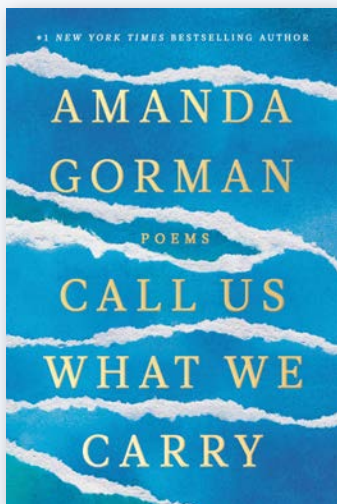


THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching Poetry  
MIDDLE SCHOOL



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## ■ INTRODUCTION

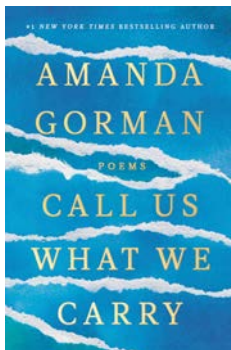
In *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice*, Patrice Vecchione has a warning for adolescents: “If you don’t write your poems, they will never be written, and the stories of your life will go untold” (p. xvi). Poet Amanda Gorman agrees, asserting in her 2019 TED-Ed talk that she realized, “No one’s ever told my story,” so she must “write her story right” through poetry.

Middle school students are in a unique position to appreciate the power of poetry to develop a sense of self and to share that self with the world. Constantly bombarded by expectations from parents, peers, and social media, poetry is a safe space where students can, as poet Tina Cane says, “answer the question of who you are ... something that changes from minute to minute.” In fact, according to Cane, author of *Alma Presses Play*, “This is, in fact, how identity works.”

The following line of inquiry frames the activities found in the guide: *How can poets use their process to explore and establish identity?* Middle school students are asked to reflect on the complexities of this question as they read closely, write critically, and collaborate with peers. Teachers can use any number or combination of strategies found in the guide as they encourage students to read, reflect, and harness the ability of poetry to “write their stories right.”

## ■ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION

Listed below are brief summaries of the books in this guide:



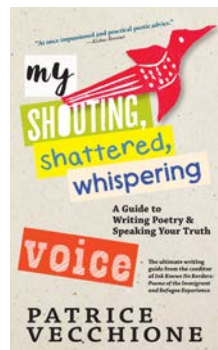
**Call Us What We Carry**  
Poems

AMANDA GORMAN

978-0-593-46506-6  
Hardcover | Viking Books  
240 pages | \$24.99

Also available: E-BOOK, AUDIO DOWNLOAD

Amanda Gorman's *Call Us What We Carry* illuminates the fears, grief, and hopes of a nation traveling through and emerging from a global pandemic. Utilizing multiple formats and connecting past, present, and future, the poetry explores our individual and collective identities.



**My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice**

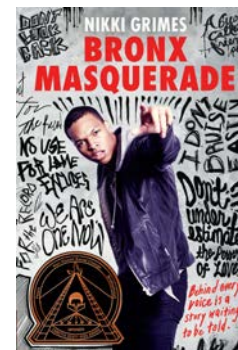
A Guide to Writing Poetry and Speaking Your Truth

PATRICE VECCHIONE

978-1-60980-985-0  
Paperback | Seven Stories Press  
128 pages | \$16.95

Also available: E-BOOK

Young poets are offered encouragement, examples, and instruction in Patrice Vecchione's *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice: A Guide to Writing Poetry and Speaking Your Truth*.



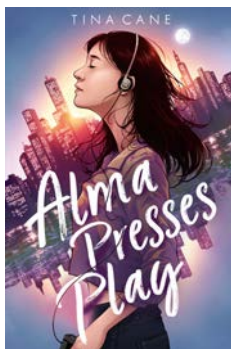
**Bronx Masquerade**

NIKKI GRIMES

978-0-425-28976-1  
Paperback | Speak  
192 pages | \$9.99 | Lexile: HL670L

Also available: E-BOOK

*Bronx Masquerade*, by Nikki Grimes, partners poetry with prose to reveal how one class of inner-city high school students uncovers character and creates connection through weekly, spoken word performances.



**Alma Presses Play**

TINA CANE

978-0-593-12114-6  
Hardcover | Make Me a World  
336 pages | \$17.99

Also available: E-BOOK, AUDIO DOWNLOAD

In Tina Cane's *Alma Presses Play*, a thirteen-year-old poet searches for self at the cusp of the new millennium. Coming of age as a half-Chinese, half-Jewish daughter of divorced parents, Alma finds inspiration and identity in the vibrant culture of New York's Greenwich Village.



**Ink Knows No Borders**

Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience

PATRICE VECCHIONE

978-1-60980-907-2  
Paperback | Triangle Square  
208 pages | \$16.95

In *Ink Knows No Borders: Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience*, poets share their unique perspectives of seeking hope, home, and humanity in a world of both bridges and barriers.

## ■ CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following classroom strategies engage students in reading, writing, and talking about poetry.

### Identity Chart

The young characters in *Bronx Masquerade*, *Alma Presses Play*, and *Ink Knows No Borders* write poetry to establish an identity separate from the one parents, teachers, or peers might impose. Challenge student readers to think critically about how identity is formed, both in these texts as well as in society. According to the organization Facing History and Ourselves, identity charts can “deepen students’ understanding of themselves, groups, nations, and historical and literary figures.” The charts center a person’s name within a starburst. The rays facing inward reflect how persons see themselves, while the rays facing outward depict the way they are seen by society. Together as a class, create an identity chart for one of the poets in *Bronx Masquerade*, *Alma Presses Play*, or *Ink Knows No Borders*. For example, outward characteristics for Tanisha Scott in *Bronx Masquerade* might include “light-skinned,” “good hair,” and “thinks she’s all that,” while inward facing rays include “wants to be accepted,” “smarter than they think,” and “defiant” (p. 74). Next, students can create their own identity charts for a different character in the text. The goal is to reflect on how identity is shaped and stereotypes built by both internal and external factors, not only in the text, but in students’ lives, as well. Finally, students can create their own identity charts and, if they choose, share them with peers in order to build community and challenge stereotypes. For templates and more information about identity charts, see <https://prhlink.com/facinghistoryidentity>.

### I Am From Project

In *Ink Knows No Borders* and *Alma Presses Play*, poets explore the concept of home. Discuss with students how, in these texts, “home” is not necessarily a specific structure, but a place or people that provides a center. As a class, read and discuss poems such as “Places and People” or “Home” from *Alma Presses Play* (pp. 4-5), or “Immigrant” from *Ink Knows No Borders* (p. 3). Then introduce students to the “I Am From” project (<https://prhlink.com/iamfromproject>) and invite them to reflect on their own concept of home by contributing to it. First, direct students to the project website and the poem “Where I’m From.” In it, George Ella Lyon uses the people, places, and objects of her childhood to paint a picture of home. After an initial whole-class read, students should read the poem again individually, annotating lines they find interesting or confusing. Next, using the “claim, support, question” strategy (<https://prhlink.com/claimsupportquestionharvard>), invite students to make interpretative claims and pose questions about the poem using their annotated lines for support. Explain that the poem inspired a national poetry writing project using Lyon’s format. Provide time for students to read some of those poems. Next, ask students to brainstorm the places, people, and objects that represent “home” to them, and to write their own “I Am From” poem to be contributed to the project or shared with the class.

### Call Back Poem

In Amanda Gorman's *Call Us What We Carry*, the poet explores the connection between past and present by recalling those who suffered and died during slavery, the 1918 influenza pandemic, AIDS epidemic, COVID-19 pandemic, and more. Challenge students to consider how identity is shaped, in part, by those who come before us, and how poetry can be used to honor them.

Show students Amanda Gorman's 2019 TED-Ed Talk (<https://prhlink.com/gormanvideo1>). In it, the poet poses two questions: Whose shoulders do you stand on? What do you stand for? She explains that telling one's story or expressing one's identity should include honoring our "honorary ancestors," a process she calls "calling back." Discuss Gorman's assertion that "It's more than worth saying their names." Ask students to turn and talk, reflecting on their own lives and on whose shoulders they stand, or whose names from their lives or from history they believe are "worth saying." Next, read and discuss one or more of Gorman's call back poems from *Call Us What We Carry*, such as "Text Tiles: The Names" (p. 129) or "\_\_\_\_\_[GATED]" (p. 141). Alternatively, read a tribute poem from a different poetry text, such as "Learning to Pray" in *Ink Has No Borders* (p. 57). Finally, ask students to write their own call back poem, inspired by a real or "honorary ancestor." Students can choose their own format or use a published poem for inspiration. Work can be posted on a classroom "Call Back Board" or shared digitally via Padlet.com or Google Jamboard.

### Instapoetry

Once considered underground and experimental, instapoetry has become a recognized, influential resource for accessible poems that focus on identity, mental health, and the challenges and joys of everyday living. Instapoems are typically brief and evocative, and often are accompanied by original or curated artwork. Read one or two instapoems online (<https://prhlink.com/rupikaur>), and ask students to compare them to poetry found in this set. For example, students might read Rupi Kaur's instapoem about voice, which is accompanied by a hand-drawn illustration and a short, narrative post. The poem reads "you were so afraid of my voice I decided to be afraid of it too." The image shows a woman's mouth covered by a man's hand. After reading, discuss the poet's use of "voice" as a metaphor for identity and how the illustration and post add to the reader's understanding. Now, ask students to read Tanisha Scott's poem "For the Record" in *Bronx Masquerade* (pp. 74-80), as well as her accompanying narrative. Ask students: *In what ways are Tanisha's peers usurping her voice? How is she taking her voice back? In what ways are Tanisha's poem and instapoet Rupi Kaur's poem similar? What image might Tanisha choose if she were to add one that supports her purpose?* As an extension, invite students to read and share their favorite instapoems, and challenge them to create their own. Students can use free online software, such as Adobe Express (<https://prhlink.com/adobepoetry>), for instapoetry templates and generators. Poems can be published on Instagram with a free class account or posted on a class website or bulletin board.



### Visual Poem

In *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice*, Patrice Vecchione discusses how poets use white space, line shape, and punctuation to contribute to meaning. Discuss with the class that some visual poetry, such as shape or concrete poems, are written in the shape of the object or topic they describe, where others use more subtle visual cues. Share with students a poem that utilizes these tools, such as “Time” in *Alma Presses Play* (p. 145), “Ethnic Studies” in *Ink Has No Borders* (p. 99), or “Pan” in *Call Us What We Carry* (p. 71). Using the MIST poetry analysis protocol (<https://prhlink.com/misttemplate>), ask students to annotate and analyze the poem’s mood, imagery, shifts, and tension, all of which are impacted by spacing, line length, diction, and punctuation. Ask students to work in partners or small groups to write a summary statement based on their analysis. For example, students might write “In ‘Ethnic Studies,’ poet Terisa Siagatonu utilizes blank space and indented lines to represent the isolating impact of racism.” Summary statements can stand alone or be further developed in an essay. Once students have examined how published poets create visual poetry to emphasize meaning, challenge them to create an original visual poem. For more ideas on visual poetry, see <https://prhlink.com/visualpoetry>.

### Erasure Poem

In *Call Us What We Carry*, Amanda Gorman devotes one section of the text to erasure poetry, poems that are created by blacking out existing words and lines from already existent literature. Explain to students that erasure, or blackout poems, are a type of “found poetry” where poets obscure some text in order to find or create an original poem from what remains. The result often illuminates something new or specific about the original text, and can reflect aspects of the erasure poet’s identity. Read and discuss Gorman’s note on erasure poetry, where she says “the key to constructive—& not destructive—erasure is to create an extension instead of an extract” (p. 90). Then read with the class one or more of her erasure poems, such as “[OURS],” (p. 96) created from a George Washington letter, or “Letter From a Nurse” (p. 94). Ask students: *What is telling about the words and lines the poet has opted to keep? In what ways is Gorman being constructive rather than destructive here, as she explains in her note?*

Now, invite students to create their own erasure poem. First, students should select a text to “erase,” such as an article, letter, song, poem, or novel. Suggest students start with a page or paragraph. Instruct students to highlight or draw a box around the words and phrases that speak to them, or that they choose to keep. Then students should blackout or erase the remaining text with a marker or correction paste. Students might also choose to draw or collage over the remaining text. Students might share their reasons for selecting the text they kept and erased, as well as their intended purpose, meaning, or theme. For more information and examples of erasure or blackout poetry, see <https://prhlink.com/poetryerasure>.

### Intersectional Prose and Poetry

In Nikki Grimes's *Bronx Masquerade*, students write both prose and poetry to unmask the identities forced on them by circumstance or society. Encourage students to try a similar format in class. Ask students to write a short, personal narrative, then use what emerges to compose a companion poem. Prompts inspired by *Bronx Masquerade* might include:

- Write about a historic or literary figure you admire. Consider lifting a line from this figure and embedding it in your poem, like Wesley does in “Long Live Langston.”
- Discuss an aspect of yourself you wish others could see or know. What is it that people get wrong about you? For inspiration, reread Raul's, Devon's, or Judianne's section.
- Diondra thinks she should draw a self-portrait that includes an easel in the foreground and a basketball jersey in the trash. Describe what your self-portrait would look like. What objects would you hold? What might appear in the background? What would you leave out and why?

After students have written their prose-poem combinations, discuss how their original work, like that of the students in *Bronx Masquerade*, is the product of multiple aspects in their lived history. No person should be defined by one attribute, such as race, religion, or gender. Read and discuss the *Global Citizen* article, “What is Intersectionality and Why is it Important?” (<https://prhlink.com/globalcitizenintersectionality>). Ask students to annotate while reading using the “Values, Identities, Actions” protocol (<https://prhlink.com/valuesharvard>) naming the values and identities being discussed and comparing them to their own before considering possible actions. The author defines intersectionality as “how multiple identities interact to create unique patterns of oppression.” Ask students: In what ways does this occur in the poetry we are reading and writing?

### Open Mic Fridays

In *Bronx Masquerade*, Mr. Ward encourages students to read or perform their poems on Open Mic Fridays. His class gradually becomes comfortable with the process of creating and sharing, providing constructive peer feedback, and encouraging one another to perform. Talk with students about the popularity of open mic nights and poetry slam competitions both locally and nationally. Show students a video from one of these performances, featuring students their age. One example can be found at <https://prhlink.com/poetryslamvideo>.

Challenge students to write or select a published poem, and perform at their own open mic days. Before holding the first one, establish norms and procedures that encourage productive and positive feedback and response. For example, remind students to “be kind; be specific; be helpful” when critiquing each other's work, and to use the “I notice; I wonder” protocol when making suggestions. Create an artistic atmosphere with curtains, microphone, and spotlight. Select or serve as an emcee by



introducing poets and soliciting applause. When students are comfortable sharing outside the classroom, consider inviting other students, staff, and community members. For digital open mics, students can record themselves and solicit peer feedback using Flip.com.

### Spoken Word Poetry

In *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice*, students are told that sound is almost as intrinsic to poetry as it is to songs and that the rhyme, rhythm, and repetition central to many poems provide essential meaning. Talk to students about the continued popularity of spoken word poetry, a type of performance poetry emphasizing word play and integrating components of jazz, hip-hop, and folk music rhythms. Poet Amanda Gorman is well-known for her spoken word art. Read and discuss one of her poems before showing students a recorded performance. For example, students can read “The Miracle of Morning” from *Call Us What We Carry* (p. 174), annotating any sound devices that stand out. Students might note the wordplay with “mourning” and “morning,” as well as “human kind” and “humans kind.” They may also recognize what *My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice* calls “half rhymes” in words such as “tethered” and “together” or “artists” and “hardest.” Show students Gorman’s video performance (<https://prhlink.com/gormanvideo2>), recorded as the world began to emerge from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ask students to turn and talk with a classmate, discussing the following prompts before sharing their thinking with the class: *How does watching the poet perform aloud alter or extend our analysis of her written work? Where do we see the poet use voice, emphasis, rhythm, or gestures to add meaning?*

Now, challenge students to write their own spoken word poem. Like Gorman and many other spoken word poets, students might find inspiration in topics that emphasize community and collective identity. In order to infuse their own identity into a poem, students should select subject matter they feel passionate about. Once they’ve selected a specific topic, students should write a “gateway line,” similar to a thesis statement, that prepares the audience for the subject at hand. Remind students that they are writing to perform, so they should integrate sensory details, imagery, and figurative language that paints a picture for their audience. Finally, direct students to add wordplay or puns, as well as rhythm, which can be created from alliteration and repetition.

### Poetry Portfolio

*My Shouting, Shattered, Whispering Voice* introduces students to “poetry chapbook manuscripts,” which are small collections of a poet’s work. Students can create such portfolios as a culminating project during their poetry unit. In doing so, they reflect on their writing, select the poems they feel are ready for publishing, and organize their portfolio in a way that illuminates growth or highlights specific themes. The portfolio also promotes the writing process as students often revisit and revise when they know an audience will be viewing their work. Students can personalize portfolios with

original artwork or photos and print the collection on paper using Adobe Reader or a similar template. Manuscripts can also be published online using a school-based website like Google Sites or a digital flipbook such as [flipsnack.com](https://flipsnack.com).

## ■ RESOURCES

The following resources provide more information and ideas for teaching with poetry:

- “5 Minute Film Festival: The Power of Spoken Word Poetry” by Edutopia:  
<https://prhlink.com/edutopiaspokenword>
- “Poetry and Power” by Facing History and Ourselves:  
<https://prhlink.com/facinghistorypower>
- “Lifting Youth Voices through Spoken Word” by Harvard Graduate School of Education:  
<https://prhlink.com/spokenwordharvard>
- “22 Ways to Teach and Learn about Poetry with The New York Times” by *The New York Times*:  
<https://prhlink.com/nytpoetry>
- “Heritage and Identity: Poems for Teens” by Poets.org:  
<https://prhlink.com/poetsorgteens>
- “Poetry and Open Mic” by Poets.org:  
<https://prhlink.com/poetsorgopenmic>
- “How to Edit Poetry: 10 Tips for Editing Your Own Poems” by MasterClass:  
<https://prhlink.com/masterclasspoetry>

## ■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Laura Reis Mayer is an instructional coach and consultant from Asheville, NC. Laura develops content and leads professional learning for national education organizations. A twice-renewed National Board Certified Teacher, she taught middle, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. She has written more than thirty teacher guides for multiple publishers.



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