

Writing Biblical Poetry

This handout contains sample poems and directions for a variety of poems. Most of the poems are based on stories from the Bible.

Type of Poem	Location in Handout
Why Did you Do It?	Pages 2 through 5
Focus Poem	Pages 6 through 8
Love / Hate Poem	Page 9
What It Is and Isn't	Pages 10 and 11
I Am Poem	Pages 12 through 14
<u>Word Play Poems</u>	Pages 15 through 19

Directions for Why did you do it?

1. After hearing / reading the story, select one person from the story to be your focus.
2. You will be asked to answer 9 questions as if you are that person.
3. These 9 questions will help you to understand the motivations behind their actions. Bear in mind that motivation is often complex so you will be asked, “Why did you do it?” four times.
4. On your first time answering the questions, simply jot down your ideas. If one of the questions is particularly difficult, feel free to skip that question or reword it a bit. The questions are simply there to direct your study of the story and to help you visualize the events.
5. After you have answered each question, return to it to make revisions. Take note of the strong verbs in the sample poem. Also, note that the sample poem incorporates specific details directly from the story. Anyone who has not heard the story could read the sample poem and understand quite a bit of the story.

Suggested topics for Why Did You Do It?

Ruth – Why did you stay with Naomi? (Book of Ruth)

Abraham – Why did you obey God when asked to sacrifice Isaac? (Genesis 22)

Eve – Why did you eat the forbidden fruit? (Genesis 3)

Deborah – Why did you agree to go to battle with Barak? (Judges 4-5)

Samson – Why did you destroy the Philistine temple? (Judges 16)

Daniel – Why did you refuse to obey the law of Darius? (Daniel 6)

Saul – Why did you go to the witch of Endor? (1 Samuel 28)

Paul – Why did you sing in jail? (Acts 15:36 – 16:40)

WHY DID YOU DO IT?	
Based on story # 52	Balaam's Donkey
Numbers 22: 1-35	
Questions to be answered as a person from one Bible story	The donkey's answers to the questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why did you do it? 2. What was the texture of the air? 3. What was the sound, color, or smell of the weather? 4. Was there a stranger? 5. Why did you do it? 6. Were promises made? 7. Would you do it again? 8. Why did you do it? 9. Why did you do it? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I ran into the field to protect my master. 2. The fresh air of morning cooled my coat. 3. Then a flash of fire from a raised sword pierced the quiet. 4. The angel stood in the path blocking my progress. 5. I ran and scooted and fell out of fear. 6. My master made empty promises to the Lord, 7. But I would try once more to keep him safe. 8. I'm a simple animal doing my job. 9. I know nothing other than to serve.

WHY DID YOU DO IT?

(Story #66) King of Trees Judges 9

1. Why did you do it?
2. What was the texture of the air?
3. What was the sound, color, or smell of the weather?
4. Was there a stranger?
5. Why did you do it?
6. Were promises made?
7. Would you do it again?
8. Why did you do it?
9. Why did you do it?

1. I murdered because I had been the rejected son.
2. The air hung heavy with the scent of blood,
3. And clouds scuttled across the sky echoing screams for mercy.
4. My band of thugs and I were strangers in their midst.
5. I did it for the lust of power.
6. My birth destined me to rule, to command, to control.
7. I would slay the 70 sons again but let not one escape.
8. I did it to be a king.
9. I did it because I am Abimelech, the son of a concubine.

**Why did you do it?
Based on story #**

Questions to be answered as a
person from one Bible story

The person's answers to the questions

1. Why did you do it?
2. What was the texture of
the air?
3. What was the sound,
color, or smell of the
weather?
4. Was there a stranger?
5. Why did you do it?
6. Were promises made?
7. Would you do it again?
8. Why did you do it?
9. Why did you do it?

Focus Poem Samples and Directions

Prompts	Response
<p>Select a person from a Bible story and focus on one part of that person: hands, feet, eyes, shoulders, etc.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write one sentence that describes your focus. 2. Write one sentence that shows the person doing something; stay focused on the one body part. 3. Write one sentence that tells something about the setting. 4. Ask the person one question that is based on the sentences you have already written. 5. Write another sentence showing the person doing something; maintain the focus. 6. Write the person’s answer to your question, but give an answer that shows that the person does not understand the question or is unwilling to give an accurate answer. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Cain’s Hands</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Dirt lodges under the nails of his powerful hands. (2) Fingers that beckoned to his brother, now curl around a stone. (3) Greedy, the black soil swallows innocent blood. (4) “When your hands till the soil, will you plant in his blood?” (5) Lifting one hand, he blocks the sun and squints as he answers, (6) “Planting season is long past; soon I’ll harvest the results of my work.”

Prompts	Response
<p>Select a person from a Bible story and focus on one part of that person: hands, feet, eyes, shoulders, etc.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write one sentence that describes your focus. 2. Write one sentence that shows the person doing something; stay focused on the one body part. 3. Write one sentence that tells something about the setting. 4. Ask the person one question that is based on the sentences you have already written. 5. Write another sentence showing the person doing something; maintain the focus. 6. Write the person's answer to your question, but give an answer that shows that the person does not understand the question or is unwilling to give an accurate answer. 	

Helpful hint: Notice the vivid verbs in each sentence of the sample poem: lodges, beckoned, curl, swallows, till, plant, blocks, squints. Avoid weak verbs (is – are – was – were – am – be – been – being) The weak verbs can be used when someone is speaking so that the dialogue sounds natural. Trying to avoid the forms of be and other weak verbs (got – went – seems – appears – became) will infuse your poetry with vivid images and power.

Suggested topics for the Focus Poem

Focus on Jael's hands as she allows Sisera to come into her tent and then kills him. (Judges 4-5)

Focus on Samson's hair after he has been blinded and thrown into prison to work the millstone. (Judges 16)

Focus on Ruth's hands as she gathers grain. (Book of Ruth)

Focus on David's eyes when Samuel is anointing him. (1 Samuel 16)

Focus on King Jereboam's hand when he points at the Prophet from Judah. (1 Kings 13)

Focus on the lips of Judas on the night he betrays Jesus. (Mark 14)

Focus on the cloak of Bartimaeus before / after his sight is restored. (Mark 10:46-52)

Sample Love / Hate Poem

Based on Luke 8: 22-39

What I love about storms

Is the power of the crashing waves.

What I hate about waves

Is the fear in me as they swamped the boat.

What I love about the boat

Is seeing my Lord and Savior sleeping.

What I hate about my Savior sleeping

Is that I feared He would not save me from death.

What I love about death

Is that it has no victory over me.

What I hate about me

Is that moment when I gave in to doubt.

What I love about doubt

Is that it is the beginning of my wisdom.

What I hate about wisdom

Is that the path to it is filled with storms and turmoil.

What I love about turmoil

Is the strength and confidence I gain battling those storms.

What I hate about storms

Is the crashing power of the waves.

Directions

The couplets move back and forth between love and hate.

The last word of the first couplet becomes the opening of the next couplet.

The poem moves full circle so that the closing couplet mirrors the opening couplet.

Suggested Stories

The Woman at the Well
(John 4:1-42)

Raising Lazarus (John 11)

Triumphal Entry / Cleansing
the Temple (Mark 11:1-19)

What It Is and Isn't

Pool of Bethesda - Based on John 5:1-12

The pool offered hope
to the blind, the lame, the paralyzed
When the water stirred up.
No magic stirs in those waters.
It has no power greater than Jesus
No substitute for God.
It is no reason for endless waiting
Depending upon man to help.
To dream of being whole
Lying in wait but not calling to God,
Will never enable anyone to
Rise up; take your mat and walk.

Directions for What It Is and Isn't

This poem focuses on an object and explains what it is and what it is not. The opening lines explain the object. In this sample the first three lines of the poem tell what the Pool of Bethesda offers to those who wait. It covers who -what and when.

The remainder of the poem tells everything that the Pool of Bethesda is NOT.

The closing of the poem explains a lesson found in the story.

Suggestions for Objects for What It Is and Isn't

The Garden Tomb

Water turned to Wine at Canaan

The Cross or The Crown of Thorns

Esther's Crown

The Jawbone of the Ass (Judges 15 – Samson's story)

Joseph's Special Coat

Moses basket on the Nile

The Woman's Lost Coin (Luke 15: 8-12)

Sample “I Am...” poem based on Luke 8: 42 – 48

A Woman Healed

I am a woman - frail and sick

I want healing, strength, peace.

I have tried every remedy and medicine the doctors prescribed, but I only grow weaker.

I see massive crowds pressing around this man they call Jesus.

I wonder if I can slip through the crowds unnoticed.

I am a woman determined to find healing.

I hope to touch the fringe of his robe without anyone noticing me.

I understand that if people see me, I could be stoned for coming near the men.

I dream of a being part of a community rather than being the one they shun.

I am a woman who believes.

I touch the fringe of his clothes.

I feel immediate change.

I hear the Master ask, “Who touched me?”

I fear that his followers will punish me when they learn that I touched his robe.

I am a woman: frightened but hopeful.

I cry as I kneel before the Master.

I hear the Master call me daughter as he says, “Your faith has healed you.”

I feel a total healing of my ravaged body.

I whisper, “Thank you, my Master.”

I am a woman – healed.

Sample #2 of I Am Poem

I am Elizabeth, righteous in the eyes of God.

I dream of having a child someday.

I hope the Lord will find favor with me and Zechariah.

I want to be fulfilled by giving birth to a child who could be the Promised One.

I worry that Zechariah has disappointed the Lord, within the Holy of Holies.

I celebrate the Good news of the Life within me.

I touch my womb and feel the child move within me.

I wonder how long I will live to care for my son.

I hear that my cousin Mary is also with child.

I try to contain my joy of Mary's announcement but I am filled with the Holy Spirit.

I say "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

I feel our son leap with joy at the presence of the Lord.

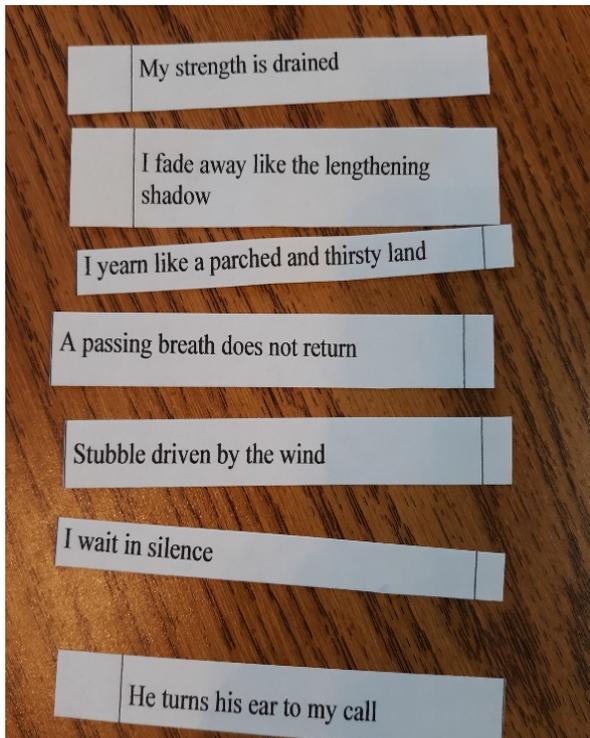
I see the hand of God in all that is happening.

I understand that his name should be John.

Directions for the I AM Poem

1. Ask the large group to make a list of the characters in the story: God, Joshua, the priests, the Israelites, 12 men who carried stones, the people of Canaan, the men who would be circumcised
2. Share the sample “I Am...” poem “A Woman Healed”
3. Explain that the class will be broken up into several groups, and each will be focused on one of the characters in the story.
4. Ask each group to select a character from the list above.
5. Give each group a set of “I Am...” cards.
6. They are to respond to each card as though they are a character in the story.
7. They can skip any card that is not applicable to the character.
8. They may use a card more than once.
9. They may create different “I Am...” cards. For example, I celebrate, I race, I crave, etc.
10. Once they have created a statement for each card, they are to arrange them as a poem.
11. Look closely at the verbs and images on each card. Rewrite them to use stronger verbs or crisper images.
12. Bring the groups together and share the poems.

Image for Step 3



Step 3

Put several phrases in order as shown in the picture to the left. Continue playing with these phrases. Simply let the words speak to you and inspire you.

Step 4

Begin to change some of the words. Add some of your own ideas. Select new phrases from the original stack if necessary.

Step 5

Continue playing with the ideas until a poem begins to take form. No need to create rhymes; free verse works better for this particular writing technique.

Step 6

Read each line and pay particular attention to the verbs. Try to eliminate weak verbs like is – are – was – be – got – went. Use verbs that create a striking image.

Step 7

If you would like, give your completed poem a title.

See the final poem below: *All Things Through Him*. Notice how it has grown from the 7 selected phrases shown in the Image for Step 4. Notice the changes, additions, and deletions.

Here is the final poem. Notice the words that are *italicized*. These words are taken directly from Psalms; they are from those slips of paper. The parts that are not italicized are from my own thoughts.

All Things Through Him

My strength is drained.

Like a *shadow* at twilight

I fade away to nothing.

News of riots, fighting, hatred, injustice

Attack my senses and fill my days.

I yearn for peace

The way *a parched and thirsty land* yearns
for rain.

I am powerless:

Like *a passing breath*,

A stubble driven by the wind.

I call to Him who is my strength.

And *I wait in silence*

As *He turns his ear to my call.*

My strength is drained

I fade away like the lengthening
shadow

I yearn like a parched and thirsty land

A passing breath does not return

Stubble driven by the wind

I wait in silence

He turns his ear to my call

Step 1 from directions above: Cut these phrases apart and spread them out on a table. Each phrase is from the Book of Psalms.

The glorious majesty of your splendor

Train my hands for battle

Days are like a passing shadow

My eyes greet each watch of the night

I arise at midnight to praise you

I remember your name at night

Let us exult and rejoice

He turns his ear to my call

Mountains skipped like rams

Tremble O earth at His presence

He touches the earth and it trembles

Wrap me in a robe of light

Abounding in kindness

Eyes of all look to you expectantly

My drink is mixed with tears

The swelling sea

The surge of waves

Stubble driven by the wind

Arise arise

Sing joyously

A passing breath does not return

Like rain on a mown field

Jagged mountains are his dwelling

The meadows are clothed in flocks

Make the wind a messenger	Praise echoes from my joyful lips
Make the clouds a chariot	I yearn like a parched and thirsty land
My strength is drained	Your mouth utters wisdom
Raise a joyous shout	The music of the lyre fills my days
Stir my heart with gracious words	Clap your hands
You fashioned me in my mother's womb	The world and its fullness are mine
How good and pleasant that brothers dwell together	The hills gird themselves with joy
To my palate your word is sweeter than honey	I wait in silence
I fade away like the lengthening shadow	I ponder your great works
He touches the mountain and it smokes	Your footsteps are unseen
	They sing among the branches
	Make my steps firm