

ASKING THE HARD QUESTIONS

A Teacher's Guide for Middle School ELA

Anchor Texts:

Lucy in Between by Sarah Callender
The Book of Questions by Pablo Neruda

Grades 7–8 | Approximately Three Weeks

Choose Your Essential Question

Select the question that best fits your students and classroom culture.

1. *What do you risk when you ask the question you're most afraid to ask?*
2. *What breaks open when we finally ask the thing we've been avoiding?*
3. *Why do the questions that matter most feel the most dangerous to ask?*
4. *What are you afraid to know?*

About the Anchor Texts

***Lucy in Between* by Sarah Callender**

Meet thirteen-year-old Lucy Bains: smarter than your average seventh grader, mime enthusiast, and devoted fan of her older brother Henry, a seventeen-year-old concert violin virtuoso. Lucy's family revolves around Henry's musical career, and she handles it with characteristic aplomb — until Henry's enthusiasm for performing collapses and his depression sets in. Not even Lucy's most fervent cheering can change the course of his downfall.

When Henry's life takes a tragic turn, Lucy and her mother head to Peru, hoping to find solace near her previously missing father. There, a generous bibliophile and bookstore owner — who is, like Lucy, no stranger to loss — proves more present than her elusive father. Lucy must confront hard truths about love and friendship, guilt and grief, and what happens when a best-friend-turned-crush is crushing on someone else.

Sarah Callender is a middle school English teacher and mental health advocate in Seattle, Washington. Her warmly observed, wryly funny novel is a natural choice for 7th and 8th graders: Lucy's voice is honest and searching, and the novel models the very act of asking uncomfortable questions with openness and courage.

Key Themes in *Lucy in Between*

- Grief, loss, and how families cope — or don't
- The cost and reward of asking hard questions
- Sibling devotion, identity, and feeling invisible
- Friendship, first crushes, and shifting loyalties
- The role of books and stories in processing pain
- Absent parents and the longing for connection

***The Book of Questions* by Pablo Neruda**

Pablo Neruda (1904–1973) is one of the most celebrated poets of the twentieth century — Nobel Prize winner, Chilean senator, diplomat, and tireless experimenter. *The Book of Questions* (*El libro de las preguntas*) was composed in the final months of his life and published posthumously. It contains 74 short poems made up entirely of questions: 316 unanswerable, playful, profound, and sometimes absurd interrogatives that range from the cosmic to the utterly mundane.

The questions circle themes of nature, time, memory, color, animals, and human longing — asked with the curiosity of a child and the wisdom of an old man who has stopped pretending to have answers. Neruda described the poems as a return to wonder: a refusal to be corralled by rational certainty. For middle schoolers, they are an invitation to ask questions without fear of being wrong — because there is no wrong answer. There is only the act of asking.

Sample Questions from *The Book of Questions*

Tell me, is the rose naked / or is that her only dress?

Why do trees conceal the splendor of their roots?

If all rivers are sweet, where does the sea get its salt?

Is there anything in the world sadder / than a train standing in the rain?

Do unshed tears wait in little lakes?

Why do leaves commit suicide when they feel yellow?

Note: *The Book of Questions* is published in both a complete edition (translated by William O'Daly, Copper Canyon Press) and a beautiful bilingual illustrated edition selected and illustrated by Paloma Valdivia (Enchanted Lion Books, 2022), which is especially accessible for middle grade readers. Teachers may choose either edition or use individual poems available via the Academy of American Poets (poets.org).

Key Craft Elements in *The Book of Questions*

- Every poem is composed entirely of questions — no statements, no answers
- Questions come in couplets (pairs of lines), often connected by feeling rather than logic
- Heavy use of personification — nature, objects, and animals are given human qualities
- Juxtaposition of the cosmic and the ordinary
- Tone ranges from playful to mournful, sometimes within the same couplet
- Originally written in Spanish — discussing translation is a rich extension opportunity.

Unit Overview

Rationale

This unit asks students to sit with a deceptively simple premise: questions are risky. Asking the hard question — about a family member's pain, about a friendship, about the world's strange beauty — can crack things open. Sometimes the answers hurt. Sometimes they heal. Most of the time, they do both.

Lucy Bains, the protagonist of *Lucy in Between*, is a natural guide for this inquiry. She is a girl who keeps asking, even when the answers scare her. Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions* offers students the radical permission to ask questions that have no answers at all — to wonder out loud without shame, with curiosity as its own reward.

Together, these two texts anchor a three-week unit that weaves novel study, poetry analysis, personal writing, and original composition. The companion texts described in the next section give teachers flexibility to choose pieces that fit their students, their classroom culture, and available time.

At a Glance

Grade Level	Grades 7–8
Duration	Approximately 3 weeks (15 class sessions of 50–60 minutes)
Anchor Texts	<i>Lucy in Between</i> by Sarah Callender <i>The Book of Questions</i> by Pablo Neruda
Essential Questions (choose one)	1. What do you risk when you ask the question you're most afraid to ask? 2. What breaks open when we finally ask the thing we've been avoiding? 3. Why do the questions that matter most feel the most dangerous to ask? 4. What are you afraid to know?
Final Product	Students compose their own <i>Book of Questions</i> poem (8–12 questions) and a personal essay or creative piece responding to the unit's essential question
Standards Alignment	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7/8.1–6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7/8.3–4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7/8.1

Choosing Your Essential Question

This unit offers four essential questions. Choose the one that best fits your students, your classroom culture, and the aspects of the unit you most want to foreground. Post it visibly on Day 1 and return to it consistently — in discussion, in writing prompts, and at the close of the unit. There is no wrong choice; each question opens the unit from a slightly different angle.

1. *What do you risk when you ask the question you're most afraid to ask?*

Direct and personal. Works well when you want students to connect the unit immediately to their own lives and experiences.

2. *What breaks open when we finally ask the thing we've been avoiding?*

Evocative and slightly Neruda-ish. Pairs especially well with the poetry side of the unit and with Lucy's arc of avoidance and eventual confrontation.

3. *Why do the questions that matter most feel the most dangerous to ask?*

More philosophical. Good for classes ready to sit with complexity and ambiguity, and for students who are strong analytical thinkers.

4. *What are you afraid to know?*

Short and immediately provocative. Keeps the personal stakes front and center throughout the unit. Pairs especially well with the Day 1 private journal.

Unit Arc

Week 1 — Opening the Question

What is a tough question? Why is asking one hard? Students meet Lucy Bains and Neruda's question-poems simultaneously, building a shared vocabulary for the unit.

Week 2 — The Cost and the Crack

Students explore what happens when hard questions break things open — unwanted truths, shifted relationships, grief exposed. Short companion texts deepen the conversation.

Week 3 — Asking Anyway

Students reckon with why we ask despite the risk, complete the novel, and craft their own Book of Questions poems and personal essays. Unit culminates in a class reading or share-out.

Companion Texts

The following short texts are offered as a menu. Teachers should select the combination that best fits their students, their time, and their instructional goals. A typical three-week unit can comfortably include 4–6 companion texts alongside the anchor novels. Suggested pairings for each week are noted.

Short Stories

"Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros | Best for: Week 1

A girl on her eleventh birthday knows she is eleven and also ten and nine and all the ages she has ever been — but in a single awful classroom moment, she cannot make herself speak up even though she knows the truth. A perfect opening text for the unit: it surfaces the cost of not asking, of silence and swallowed words. Students immediately recognize the narrator's paralysis.

Discussion anchor: *What was the question Rachel couldn't ask? What stopped her — and what did that silence cost?*

"The Flowers" by Alice Walker | Best for: Week 2

A young girl wanders through the beauty of spring in a moment of pure, innocent curiosity — until she stumbles upon something that shatters that innocence forever. A spare, devastating story about the moment when the answer to your wondering turns out to be something you cannot un-know. Pairs beautifully with Lucy's own unwanted discoveries about her brother.

Discussion anchor: *Myop's exploration was a kind of question — what happens when curiosity leads to a truth we weren't ready for?*

"Thank You, Ma'am" by Langston Hughes | Best for: Week 2 or 3

A boy tries to steal a woman's purse and instead ends up in a conversation that forces him to reckon with who he is and what he wants. Mrs. Jones asks him nothing directly — but the implicit questions she poses reshape him entirely. An excellent counterpoint: sometimes the hardest questions are the ones someone else asks of us. Short, accessible, and endlessly rich.

Discussion anchor: *What question does Mrs. Jones seem to be asking Roger without words? What question does Roger end up asking himself?*

"The Circuit" by Francisco Jiménez | Best for: Week 1 or 2

A young migrant farmworker boy tries to hold onto the things that matter — school, a teacher, a trumpet — as his family moves from harvest to harvest. The story is full of questions the narrator keeps inside: about fairness, belonging, and what kind of future is possible. A rich text for students who may also hold questions they feel they cannot ask aloud.

Discussion anchor: *What questions does Panchito seem to be asking quietly throughout this story? Why can't he ask them out loud?*

Poems

"Questions About Angels" by Billy Collins | Best for: Week 1

A playful but surprisingly sincere poem about asking absurd, unanswerable questions — and how those questions reveal something true about us anyway. Collins's humor makes the poem highly accessible, and it pairs naturally with Neruda's questions: both poets ask things that can't be answered, and that's precisely the point.

Discussion anchor: *Why does the speaker keep asking about angels even though no one can answer? What does the act of asking do for him?*

"I Ask My Mother to Sing" by Li-Young Lee | Best for: Week 2

A quiet, grief-soaked poem in which three generations of women sing together — and weep — about a homeland the speaker has never seen. The poem is a question asked through music rather than words: can we hold loss and beauty at the same time? Pairs beautifully with Lucy's own grief and her search for her absent father in Peru.

Discussion anchor: *What question does the speaker seem to be asking his mother and grandmother? Why does he ask them to sing even though it makes them cry?*

"Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou | Best for: Week 3

A poem built on defiant questions hurled at those who would diminish the speaker. Frame it for students as a form of courageous inquiry: asking hard questions of systems and people who have tried to silence you. A natural text for discussing questions as power, and for connecting to moments when Lucy or other characters push back.

Discussion anchor: *Angelou's questions are directed at someone. Who? What is she demanding that they acknowledge? Is asking a question a form of power?*

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost | Best for: Week 1 or 3

Classic, but worth teaching against type. Rather than a poem about bold choices, it is a poem about a person asking himself "what if" in real time — and then deciding, later, to narrate it as a choice. A rich text for discussing the questions we ask ourselves at crossroads, and how we tell stories about them afterward.

Discussion anchor: *What question is the speaker asking in this poem? Does he actually know the answer — or is he imagining one?*

"Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde | Best for: Week 1 or 2

A fourteen-year-old lists the anxieties and injustices crowding her mind, each stanza ending with her mother behind the closed bedroom door. Every line is an unasked question. Students at this age will recognize the feeling: a swarm of questions with no one to bring them to. Particularly powerful for students navigating family tension or feeling unseen.

Discussion anchor: *What questions is the speaker afraid to ask? Who would she ask them of — and why does that door stay closed?*

Nonfiction

"The Danger of a Single Story" (TED Talk transcript) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | Best for: Week 2 or 3

An accessible, compelling essay/talk about what happens when we stop asking questions and accept one story as the whole truth. Adichie's examples are vivid and student-friendly. Use to deepen conversation about the questions characters in *Lucy in Between* fail to ask — and what single stories they've accepted about each other.

Discussion anchor: *What "single story" does each character in Lucy in Between believe about someone else? What question might break that story open?*

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" — excerpts — by Wallace Stevens | Best for: Poetry craft, Week 1 or 2

Not a question poem, but a poem that demands the reader ask questions — about point of view, about what changes when perspective changes. Useful as a craft model for students thinking about their own Neruda-inspired poems: what if each question were asked from a different angle?

Craft focus: *How does the perspective the speaker takes change what the question is? Can you write a question thirteen different ways?*

Extension Options

For advanced readers or enrichment, consider pairing *Lucy in Between* with short excerpts from the following:

- *When You Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead — another novel centering a young protagonist asking questions that feel impossible to answer
- *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros — vignette structure and a narrator who keeps wondering about her own place in the world
- *Counting by 7s* by Holly Goldberg Sloan — a remarkably curious protagonist whose questions are both her superpower and her source of isolation

Week-by-Week Instructional Plan

Session descriptions below assume 50–60 minute class periods. Each session includes the core activity; companion text choices are indicated where applicable. Teachers should adapt pacing to their students and select companion texts from the menu in the previous section.

Week 1 — Opening the Question

Central Idea:

What is a tough question? Why is asking one so hard? Students enter the unit through curiosity and discomfort alike.

Vocabulary to introduce: inquiry, avoidance, vulnerability, consequence, courage

Day	Session Title	Description
Day 1	What Is a Tough Question?	Hook: Display 3–4 Neruda questions on the board ("Is there anything sadder than a train standing in the rain?"). Ask: What makes a question hard to answer? Introduce the unit essential question. Students write privately: a question they have been afraid to ask — about family, friendship, the world. These are not shared. Brief introduction to both anchor texts: who Lucy Bains is, who Pablo Neruda was. Build anticipation.
Day 2	Entering Neruda's Questions	Close reading: 2–3 poems from <i>The Book of Questions</i> as a class. Chart: What types of questions does Neruda ask? (Nature, time, color, sadness, joy, the absurd.) Discuss: Neruda never answers his questions. Why? What does that feel like to the reader? Students freewrite 5–6 Neruda-inspired questions of their own (playful, wondering, no answers required). Share a few aloud.
Day 3	Meeting Lucy	Begin reading <i>Lucy in Between</i>. Focus on the opening chapters: Who is Lucy? What questions is she already sitting with about Henry, her mother, her family? Companion text option: "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros. Read aloud. Discuss: What question couldn't Rachel ask? What stopped her? Bridge: How is Lucy's situation similar to Rachel's? What questions might Lucy be swallowing?
Day 4	Craft: How Questions Work in Poetry	Revisit Neruda craft elements: couplets, personification, juxtaposition, the cosmic vs. the ordinary. Mini-lesson with examples. Partner activity: Students categorize a set of 10–12 Neruda questions by type. What patterns do they notice? Begin first draft of personal question poem — at least 8 questions, no answers allowed.

Day 5	Lucy and the Questions She Carries	Continued reading and discussion of <i>Lucy in Between</i>. Focus: What hard questions does Lucy ask — and which does she avoid? Introduce the "Question Tracker": an ongoing graphic organizer students keep throughout the novel. For each question Lucy asks (or avoids), students note what the question is, what it costs, and what it reveals. Exit ticket: Students identify one question they think Lucy is afraid to ask.
--------------	---	---

Week 2 — The Cost and the Crack

Central Idea:

Asking hard questions can break things open — sometimes painfully. Students explore unwanted truths, shifted relationships, and the cost of curiosity.

Vocabulary to deepen: revelation, ambiguity, grief, confrontation, perspective

Day	Session Title	Description
Day 6	When the Answer Hurts	Companion text: "The Flowers" by Alice Walker. Read aloud. Discuss: Myop's exploration was a form of questioning — what happens when innocent curiosity leads to a truth we weren't ready for? Connect to <i>Lucy in Between</i>: What truth has Lucy been circling around? What is she not ready to know? Writing: A narrative paragraph about a time a question changed a relationship, a belief or opinion, or a value system.
Day 7	Questions Others Ask of Us	Companion text: "Thank You, Ma'am" by Langston Hughes. Read and discuss: Mrs. Jones asks Roger several questions throughout their brief interaction. What is she communicating, both by what she asks and by what she doesn't ask? Discussion: Is it harder to ask a hard question of someone else — or to be asked one yourself? What's the difference? Students add to their Question Trackers: identify a moment when someone in <i>Lucy in Between</i> asks a question that puts another character on the spot.
Day 8	Lucy in Peru — New Questions	Continued reading: Lucy and her mother arrive in Peru. New characters, new grief, new questions. Companion poem option: "I Ask My Mother to Sing" by Li-Young Lee. Close reading: what question is the speaker asking through the act of requesting the song? Discussion: Is it possible to ask a question without words — through a gesture, a song, a look? Find a moment in the novel where a character asks something wordlessly.
Day 9	Socratic Seminar: Is It Better to Know?	Seminar question: Is it better to ask a hard question and get a painful answer, or to stay in comfortable uncertainty?

		Students prepare by returning to their Question Trackers and selecting two examples from the novel to bring to the discussion. Post-seminar reflection: Has your answer changed from Day 1? Why or why not?
Day 10	Poetry Workshop: Sharpening Your Questions	Return to students' draft question poems from Week 1. Peer workshop in pairs: Are the questions genuinely open? Do any feel like they have hidden answers? Which questions take the most courage to ask? Mini-lesson: Neruda's tone — how does he shift between playful and mournful, sometimes in a single couplet? Identify moments in students' own drafts where tone could deepen. Revised draft due at end of session.

Week 3 — Asking Anyway

Central Idea:

Why do we ask despite the risk? Students complete the novel, craft their final poems, and reckon with asking as an act of courage, power, and love.

Vocabulary to deepen: defiance, wonder, connection, identity, voice

Day	Session Title	Description
Day 11	Questions as Power	Companion poem: "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou. Discuss: What is Angelou demanding the reader to acknowledge? Is asking a question a form of power or of deference, and even weakness? Connect this to Lucy: find a moment in the novel where Lucy asks something that feels like an act of courage or defiance.
Day 12	Toward an Answer — Lucy's Resolution	Finish <i>Lucy in Between</i>. Focus: What is the hardest question Lucy finally faces? What does she discover? Discussion: Did asking hard questions help Lucy — or hurt her? Is there a meaningful difference by the end? Students return to the private question they wrote on Day 1. (Still not shared.) They reflect in writing: has anything shifted in how you think about that question?
Day 13	Neruda's Final Gift: The Freedom of Wondering	Return to <i>The Book of Questions</i> with fresh eyes. Revisit a poem read in Week 1 alongside a new one. What do students notice now that they didn't before? Discuss: Neruda wrote these poems as an old man who had lived through war, exile, and loss. Why would someone with that much experience choose to end with questions rather than answers? Students finalize their Book of Questions poems. Final poems should include 8–12 questions, demonstrate range of tone, use at least one literary device studied (personification, juxtaposition, enjambment).

Day 14	Final Writing Workshop	Students work on final assessment writing (see Final Assessment section). Teacher confers with individuals. Option: Students may also write a final entry in the Question Tracker reflecting on Lucy's overall journey.
Day 15	Class Book of Questions — Culminating Share-Out	Students share their original question poems in a read-aloud circle (or small groups). No commentary needed — just listening. Compile poems into a class Book of Questions document. Closing discussion: What question from this unit will you keep asking?

Final Assessment

Component 1: Original Book of Questions Poem (Required)

All students compose their own Book of Questions poem of 8–12 questions. The poem should demonstrate understanding of Neruda's craft and contain questions that feel genuinely open — questions the writer actually wonders about, rather than questions with obvious answers.

Poem Requirements

- 8–12 questions, no statements or answers
- Questions are genuinely open — no trick questions or questions with obvious right answers
- Range of tone: at least one playful/surprising question and at least one emotionally resonant question
- At least one use of personification, juxtaposition, or enjambment
- Questions feel personal and specific, not generic

Component 2: Choose Your Form (Required)

Students choose one of the following to accompany their poem:

Option A: Personal Narrative Essay

Write about a time you asked (or couldn't ask) a hard question. What was at stake? What happened? Word count: 300–400 words. The essay should connect — explicitly or implicitly — to the unit's essential question.

Option B: Literary Analysis

Write an analysis of how Sarah Callender uses Lucy's questions (or avoidance of questions) to develop her character across the novel. Word count 300–400 words, with at least two specific textual examples.

Option C: Creative Response

Write a short story (400–500 words) in which a character must decide whether to ask something difficult. The story should show — not tell — the stakes of the decision, and it should end with the character's choice and a consequence.

Rubric — Original Poem

Openness of Questions	Questions are genuinely unanswerable; deeply curious and specific	Most questions are open; a few too predictable	Some questions have obvious answers or feel generic	Most questions have clear answers or feel formulaic
Emotional Range	Skillfully shifts between playful and resonant; both register strongly	Shows range; tonal shifts are mostly effective	Limited range; tone stays mostly flat	Tone is monotone or unclear throughout
Craft & Literary Devices	Sophisticated, purposeful use of personification, juxtaposition, and/or enjambment	Uses at least one device clearly and effectively	Attempts craft devices; execution is inconsistent	Minimal evidence of intentional craft choices
Voice & Specificity	Questions feel distinctly this writer's own; images are fresh and specific	Voice is present; most images are specific	Voice is emerging; some images are vague or borrowed	Voice is unclear; questions feel generic

Discussion Questions

For *Lucy in Between*

Opening the Novel (Chapters 1–5)

1. Lucy describes herself as a "clapper" for Henry. What does that word tell you about how she sees herself in her family? Is that a question she's aware of or one she hasn't yet asked?
2. What is the question Lucy seems most afraid to ask about Henry in the early chapters? Why do you think she avoids it?
3. How does Callender use humor and Lucy's voice to make difficult subjects approachable? Find a moment where something funny is also something painful.

Middle of the Novel

4. When Lucy and her mother leave for Peru, what are they running from — and what are they running toward? Are those the same thing?
5. How does the bookstore owner in Peru ask questions differently than the adults in Lucy's regular life? What does that difference mean to Lucy?
6. Lucy carries a lot of questions about her father. What does she seem most afraid to discover?

End of the Novel

7. What is the hardest question Lucy asks by the end of the book? What does she learn or realize — and does the answer help her?
8. Callender has said that the book is partly about the role books and stories play in helping us process pain. How does Lucy's relationship with reading and words connect to the theme of asking questions? How does Lucy's work as a mime relate to this theme?
9. Did Lucy's courage (or lack of it) in asking questions change over the course of the novel? What evidence supports your answer?

For *The Book of Questions*

10. Neruda wrote these poems at the end of his life, after decades of political struggle, exile, and loss. Why do you think he chose to end with questions instead of answers?
11. Which of Neruda's questions surprised you the most? Which one do you actually want to try to answer?
12. Neruda asks about nature, time, color, animals, and grief. What does the range of his questions tell you about what mattered to him?
13. Choose one question from the collection and rewrite it in your own words. Does it feel different? What changed?
14. Neruda never provides an answer to any question. Is that frustrating, or is it freeing? Why?

Connecting the Texts

15. Both Lucy Bains and Pablo Neruda are relentless question-askers. How are their questions different in form? How are they similar in spirit?
16. Neruda asks: "Is there anything in the world sadder than a train standing in the rain?" What would Lucy Bains's version of that question be — a question that's partly about sadness and partly about something else entirely?
17. The unit's essential question asks when asking a hard question is worth the cost. How do both texts answer that question — directly or indirectly?
18. At the end of the unit, return to the question you wrote on Day 1. Has anything in these texts changed how you think about it? Do you want to ask it yet?

Writing Workshop: Crafting Your Book of Questions

Introducing the Form

Before students write their own question poems, they need to understand what makes Neruda's questions feel different from ordinary questions. Here is a classroom sequence for building that understanding:

Step 1: Noticing What Neruda Does

Display 6–8 questions from *The Book of Questions*. With students, sort them into rough categories:

- Questions about the natural world (roses, trees, oceans, seasons)
- Questions about time, color, and abstract concepts
- Questions about emotions, sadness, and longing
- Questions that are absurd or funny
- Questions that feel like riddles

Ask: What do all of these have in common? (They cannot be answered with a fact. They make you feel something as you read them.)

Step 2: What Makes a Good Question Poem

A strong question poem:

- Asks questions that are genuinely open — no hidden right answers
- Uses specific, concrete images (not "a bird" but "a crow with one eye open in the rain")
- Shifts between the playful and the emotionally true
- Personifies objects, animals, or forces of nature to surprising effect
- Uses the question form to say something the speaker couldn't say as a statement

Step 3: Generating Questions

Give students 10 minutes to write fast, without judging. Prompt categories:

- A question about someone you love (alive or not)
- A question about something in nature that has always puzzled you
- A question about a color, a smell, a sound
- A question about something you lost
- A question that begins with "Why does..." that nobody could answer
- A question that is partly funny and partly sad

Step 4: Selecting and Shaping

From their list, students choose the 8–12 strongest questions. Encourage them to:

- Cut any question that has an obvious answer
- Rewrite vague questions to be more specific and image-driven
- Vary sentence length — short couplets and longer questions can alternate
- Read the poem aloud to test whether it sounds like their own voice

Model Lesson: Close Reading a Neruda Poem

Use Poem III from *The Book of Questions* for this model, as it is widely available and accessible. Display the poem and work through these questions together:

19. What is the first question asking — literally? What might it be asking beneath the surface?
20. The rose is described as if she is a person wearing clothing. Find the personification. What does it make you feel about the rose?
21. Neruda pairs questions about a rose and a tree in this poem. What do those two things have in common? Why might he have put them together?
22. Read the poem aloud. What do you notice about the rhythm — where do you pause, where does it speed up?
23. If you were going to write a companion question to go with one of Neruda's questions, what would it be?

Sample Student Mentor Questions

Share these examples — drawn from student work and teacher modeling — to illustrate range of tone and subject:

Playful / Surprising:

Do socks dream of feet?

Where does Tuesday go when Wednesday arrives?

Emotionally Resonant:

Does the house remember us when we are gone?

Why does love make so much room for someone who is no longer here?

Combining Both:

If silence is just an empty cup, who is supposed to fill it?

Teacher Notes & Classroom Considerations

Handling Grief and Difficult Themes

Lucy in Between deals directly with depression, suicide, and grief — themes that may be close to home for some students. Check the [mental health resources tab](#) at SarahCallender.com to learn how to respectfully discuss suicide and depression.

A few practices to keep in mind:

- On Day 1, students write a private question. Make clear that these are never collected or shared. This matters: some students will write things they are genuinely carrying. Give them the space.
- Consider letting students and parents/guardians know at the start of the unit that *Lucy in Between* contains a character who dies by suicide. This is a sensitive topic for everyone, and especially for students who have been affected by suicide.
- Be ready to follow up privately with students who seem especially activated by the novel's themes. Coordinate with your school counselor if needed.
- The question form itself is emotionally protective — it allows students to circle difficult material without having to land on it directly. Use that.

Differentiation

For students who need support:

- Provide a question-starter bank for the poetry workshop ("Why does ____ feel like ____?" / "What does ____ dream about?" / "Where does ____ go when ____?")
- Allow partnered reading for the novel
- Scaffold the Question Tracker with sentence frames
- For the final assessment, Option C (creative story) often gives less-confident writers more traction than analysis

For students who are ready to go further:

- Read Neruda's questions in the original Spanish alongside the translation — what changes? What questions do you have about translation itself?
- Research Neruda's political life and exile. How does knowing that context change how you read a poem that asks "Is there anything sadder than a train standing in the rain?"
- Write a response poem to Neruda — answer one of his questions in the question form (a question that answers a question)
- Compare Lucy Bains with another young protagonist navigating family grief (*Counting by 7s*, *The Remarkable Journey of Coyote Sunrise*)

The Question Tracker

This ongoing graphic organizer is a low-stakes, high-value tool. Students use it throughout the novel to track moments where a character asks a hard question — or fails to. A simple three-column format works well:

The Question (or Avoided Question)	What It Costs (or What Silence Costs)	What It Reveals About the Character

A Note on Classroom Culture

This unit asks students to take real risks — to write questions they actually mean, about things that actually matter to them. That requires a classroom culture where intellectual vulnerability is safe. A few suggestions:

- Model your own question. On Day 1, share a hard question you carry — something genuinely open, something you don't have an answer to. This signals that the teacher is inside the inquiry too.
- Normalize not knowing. The whole premise of Neruda's book is that not-knowing is generative. Reward the quality of a question, not the certainty of an answer.
- Return to the private journal throughout the unit. Students don't have to share what they wrote — but encourage them to re-read it as the unit progresses and notice if anything has shifted.

Resources

- *Lucy in Between* by Sarah Callender (Algonquin Young Readers, 2023)
- *The Book of Questions* by Pablo Neruda, translated by William O'Daly (Copper Canyon Press, 2001)
- *The Book of Questions*, illustrated edition, selected and translated by Sara Lissa Paulson, illustrated by Paloma Valdivia (Enchanted Lion Books, 2022) — recommended for classroom display and read-aloud
- Individual Neruda poems available freely at poets.org (Academy of American Poets)
- "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros — available in *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991)
- "The Flowers" by Alice Walker — available in *In Love and Trouble* (1973)
- "Thank You, Ma'am" by Langston Hughes — widely anthologized and freely available online
- "I Ask My Mother to Sing" by Li-Young Lee — available in *Rose* (1986) and at poets.org
- "Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde — available in *The Black Unicorn* (1978)
- "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou — available in *And Still I Rise* (1978) and at poets.org
- "The Danger of a Single Story" TED Talk transcript — available at ted.com