

ELA LESSON PLANS

A Book of Questions

Reading & Writing with Pablo Neruda

Grades 7 & 8 · Three 45-Minute Lessons

UNIT OVERVIEW

This three-lesson sequence introduces 7th and 8th grade students to Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions* as a mentor text for original poetry writing. Students move from first encounter (noticing and wondering) through craft study (identifying what makes Neruda's questions feel like poems) to drafting and revision. No prior poetry experience is required. The only prerequisite is curiosity.

Note to Teachers: These lessons can be compressed into one-two lessons if necessary.

Lesson 1: How Does a Poem Generate Wonder? — Entering Neruda's world through close reading and wonder-gathering

Lesson 2: How Does a Question Become a Poem? — Studying craft moves (figurative language) and writing a first draft

Lesson 3: Revising Into Wonder — Sharpening language and reading poems aloud

LESSON 1

What Does a Poem Ask?

*Entering the World of Neruda's *The Book of Questions**

Grade	7th & 8th Grade ELA
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Duration	45 minutes
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Standards	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7-8.4 · RL.7-8.5 · W.7-8.4 · SL.7-8.1
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Materials	Printed excerpts from <i>The Book of Questions</i> (poems I, II, III, and VI) · Student journals or loose paper · Whiteboard or projector Link to Internet Archive of <i>The Book of Questions</i> (in English) PDF Link to <i>The Book of Questions</i> (bilingual) PDF Link to Sara Lissa Paulson's <i>Book of Questions</i> (a picture book)
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Learning Objectives

- Students will notice and describe the defining features of Neruda's question-poem form.
- Students will identify the emotional and imaginative effect of questions used as poetry.
- Students will generate a list of personal wonder-questions as raw material for future writing.

Background for Teachers

Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions* (*El Libro de las Preguntas*, 1974) was his final completed manuscript, published posthumously. It consists entirely of couplet questions—no answers, no explanations. The questions range from the cosmic ("Tell me, is the rose naked / or is that her only dress?") to the playful, the political, and the heartbroken. For middle schoolers, this form is immediately accessible: it frees them from the pressure of having answers and invites them into wonder.

Neruda's questions work as poems because they are specific, surprising, and grounded in concrete images. They are NOT general ("Why is the sky blue?") but playful and particular ("Why doesn't Thursday talk itself / into coming after Friday?"). Helping students feel (and delight in) this distinction is the heart of the lesson.

Lesson Sequence

HOOK — Opening with One Question (5 min)
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5 min	Write a single Neruda question on the board before students enter—for example: "If all rivers are sweet, where does the sea get its salt?" As class begins, simply ask students: What do you notice about this sentence? Take 4–5 responses. Draw out that it is a question, it does not answer itself, and it makes you feel something or picture something. Tell students: Today we are going to read a book made entirely of questions like this one.
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READ ALOUD & FIRST RESPONSE (10 min)

7 min	Read Poems I, II, and III aloud while students follow along on their printed excerpts. Read slowly, with pauses. Ask students to underline any question that surprises them, delights them, or confuses them in an interesting way.
3 min	Quick pair-share: Tell your partner one question you underlined and say one word describing how it made you feel. Take 2–3 whole-class shares.

CLOSE READING — Noticing the Craft (12 min)

12 min	Project or write this analysis frame on the board: Neruda's questions are (1) specific and concrete, (2) impossible to answer with a simple fact, and (3) connected to a feeling or image. Read Poem VI together. Model applying this frame to one couplet, thinking aloud: "This question is specific because... It can't be answered simply because... The image it makes me see is..." Then ask students to apply the same frame to one couplet of their choosing from the handout. Students write 3–4 sentences in their journals. Share 2–3 aloud.
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WRITING INVITATION — Gathering Wonder Questions (13 min)

2 min	Prompt: Think about things in your own life—your neighborhood, your family, your body, the sky, time, food, color, sound—that you have ever wondered about, even in a small or silly way. These don't have to be deep. They just have to be sincere ideas and questions about which you are curious.
10 min	Students free-write a list of at least 8–10 of their own wonder-questions. Encourage specificity: not "Why do people fight?" but "Why do my brother and I fight hardest on Sundays?" Circulate and prompt students who are stuck with: What confuses you? What have you noticed that you can't explain? What do you wish you could ask someone who is no longer alive?
1 min	Students star their two favorite questions—the ones that feel most alive or strange. These will be the seeds for Lesson 2.

CLOSING (5 min)

5 min	Whole-class share: go around the room (or popcorn style) and ask each student to read one of their starred questions aloud, no commentary. Let the questions
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	accumulate in the air. Close by telling students: Tomorrow we'll start shaping these into poems.
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Differentiation

Support

- Provide a sentence frame: "Why does _____ always / never / still _____?"
- Allow students to first write questions in their home language, then translate or keep bilingual.

Extension

- Ask advanced students to identify which of Neruda's techniques (contrast, personification, scale shift from tiny to cosmic) appears in Poem VI and write a question deliberately using one of those techniques.

Assessment

Informal: circulate during journal writing and check that students are generating concrete, specific questions rather than abstract generalities. Collect journals or ask students to copy their two starred questions onto a sticky note as an exit ticket.

LESSON 2

How Does a Question Become a Poem?

Studying Neruda's Craft and Drafting Original Question-Poems

Grade	7th & 8th Grade ELA
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Duration	45 minutes
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Standards	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7-8.4 · RL.7-8.5 · W.7-8.3d · W.7-8.4 · W.7-8.5
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Materials	Student journals with wonder-questions from Lesson 1 · Printed excerpts from <i>The Book of Questions</i> (poems VII, XIV, XVIII, XXII) · Craft Moves anchor chart (see below) · Draft paper
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Learning Objectives

- Students will identify at least three specific craft moves Neruda uses to make questions feel poetic.
- Students will draft an original question-poem of 6–10 lines using their personal wonder-questions as source material.
- Students will give and receive specific, text-based feedback using a structured protocol.

Craft Moves Anchor Chart

Prepare this chart on the board or as a handout before class:

Craft Move	What It Does	Example from Neruda
Pairing opposites	Creates tension and surprise by linking unlike things	<i>"If all rivers are sweet, / where does the sea get its salt?"</i>
Personifying the non-human	Gives objects, ideas, or animals feelings and choices	<i>"What does the yellow butterfly / say to the light?"</i>
Scale shift	Leaps between the tiny and the enormous, the personal and the cosmic	<i>"How many weeks are in a color? / How many centuries in a day?"</i>
Concrete specificity	Anchors wonder in a precise image or object rather than abstraction	<i>"Why doesn't Thursday talk itself / into coming after Friday?"</i>

Lesson Sequence

HOOK — Craft Detective (8 min)

3 min	Read Poem XIV aloud twice. On the second read, ask students to listen for anything that feels surprising or poetic about HOW the question is asked, not just what it asks.
5 min	Introduce the Craft Moves anchor chart. Ask: Which of these moves do you see in Poem XIV? Students call out observations; teacher annotates the projected poem or writes notes beside the chart. Validate multiple readings.

GUIDED PRACTICE — Craft Hunting (10 min)

10 min	Students work in pairs with poems XVIII and XXII. Task: Find at least two craft moves from the chart in these poems. Write the line and name the move in your journal. Debrief: Take 3–4 pairs' findings. Ask: Why do you think Neruda uses this move? What does it do to you as a reader? Establish the key insight: these moves make questions feel bigger than their words—they open up rather than close down.
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DRAFTING — Writing the Poem (18 min)

2 min	Students return to their wonder-questions from Lesson 1 and choose 3–5 that feel richest. Remind them: You are not writing one question—you are weaving several into a poem. They can be related or surprising in their variety, just as Neruda's are.
14 min	Independent drafting. Students write a question-poem of 6–10 lines (3–5 couplets). Encourage them to try at least one craft move deliberately. Circulate; when a student writes a question that feels vague ("Why is life hard?"), coach them toward specificity: "When, exactly? Where? What does it look like?"
2 min	Students title their draft. Neruda's titles are irreverent—they can be a single image, a single word, or a fragment.

PEER RESPONSE — Warm & Cool (7 min)

7 min	Pairs swap drafts. Reader reads silently, then completes this frame aloud: "The question that surprised me most was _____ because _____. One place you might push toward more specificity or try a craft move is _____. " Poets listen without responding. Then swap. Close: each student notes one revision they want to make.
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CLOSING (2 min)

2 min

Exit ticket: On a sticky note, students write the one line from their draft they are most proud of and one question they still have about the assignment.

Differentiation

Support

- Provide a starter template: "Why does _____ / when _____? / How long has _____ / been _____?" to scaffold the couplet structure.
- Allow students to choose just one craft move to attempt deliberately; others can emerge naturally.

Extension

- Challenge students to write two poems: one that uses only concrete, observable things (what you can touch/see/hear) and one that uses only abstract concepts—then compare how the poems feel different.

Assessment

Collect drafts. Look for: (1) the poem consists entirely of questions, (2) at least one question demonstrates concrete specificity, (3) student has attempted a couplet or other deliberate line structure. Written feedback should affirm what is working and name one craft move to try in revision.

LESSON 3

Revising Into Wonder

Sharpening Language and Publishing Question-Poems

Grade	7th & 8th Grade ELA
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Duration	45 minutes
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Standards	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7-8.4 · W.7-8.5 · W.7-8.6 · SL.7-8.4 · SL.7-8.6
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Materials	Student drafts from Lesson 2 · Teacher-prepared model revision (see below) · Revision Lenses handout or projected on board · Final copy paper or access to word processing
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Learning Objectives

- Students will apply at least two targeted revision strategies to their draft question-poem.
- Students will produce a polished final copy ready for sharing or publication.
- Students will read their poems aloud with attention to pacing and emphasis.

Revision Lenses

Write or display the following before class. Students will use these as a revision checklist:

Lens	Ask Yourself	Revision Move
Specificity	Is any question vague or abstract? Could you replace a general noun with a specific one?	<i>Swap one word for a sharper, stranger, or more concrete word</i>
Surprise	Does at least one question genuinely surprise you? Could a question be stranger or more unexpected?	<i>Flip the expected: instead of asking about day, ask about night</i>
Sound	Read aloud—do the words sound good together? Are there accidental rhymes that feel forced, or sounds you could lean into?	<i>Read aloud and mark any clunky phrases; adjust for rhythm</i>
Line breaks	Does each line feel like a breath? Does the break create a small suspense before the next line?	<i>Try breaking lines at a different word and see how it changes the feel</i>

First & last	Is your first question strong enough to pull a reader in? Does your last question leave an echo?	<i>Try moving your best question to the end; try writing a new opening</i>
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Lesson Sequence

HOOK — A Revision in Real Time (8 min)	
8 min	Project a teacher-written model draft (written yourself, or an anonymized student draft from a previous year—never a current student's without permission). Read it aloud as-is. Then think aloud through two Revision Lenses—Specificity and Surprise—and make changes in front of the class. Read the revised version aloud. Ask: What changed? Did the poem get stronger? Why? Establish: revision is not fixing mistakes—it is sharpening what is already interesting.
INDEPENDENT REVISION (20 min)	
2 min	Students read their draft silently and put a check next to lines they like and a question mark next to lines that feel flat or vague.
15 min	Students revise using the Revision Lenses chart, targeting at least two lenses. Encourage students to write revised lines beside or below originals rather than erasing—revision is a conversation, not an erasure.
3 min	Students choose which lines from their draft vs. revision to keep, and begin writing or typing their final copy.
FINAL COPY & READING PREP (7 min)	
5 min	Students complete final copy (handwritten or typed). Title is required; they may also add a brief dedication ("For my grandmother, who never answered me.") if they wish.
2 min	Students practice reading their poem aloud to themselves once, marking where they will pause or slow down.
POETRY READING — Author's Chair (8 min)	
8 min	Volunteers (or a set of 4–6 chosen ahead of time) read their poems aloud to the class from the front. After each poem, 5–10 seconds of silence before light applause—a poetry reading norm. After 2–3 poems, ask the class: What question from today's poems is still sitting with you?

CLOSING (2 min)

2 min

Return to Neruda. Read one final couplet from *The Book of Questions*—ideally one no one has seen yet. Tell students: Neruda never answered his questions. He believed the asking was the point. Leave students with: What question will you carry out of this room today?

Differentiation

Support

- Reduce the required revision lenses to one; provide a side-by-side "before and after" example for each lens.
- For students anxious about reading aloud, allow them to ask a partner to read their poem while they stand at the front.

Extension

- Invite students to write a brief poet's note (3–5 sentences) explaining what they were wondering about when they wrote the poem and one choice they made in revision.
- Students who finish early can write a second poem in response to a peer's—answering their classmate's questions with more questions.

Assessment

Collect final copies. Evaluate using a simple 3-point rubric: (1) Form—the poem consists of questions and has deliberate line structure; (2) Craft—at least one question demonstrates concrete specificity or a named craft move; (3) Voice—the poem reflects the student's own perspective and wonder. Conference individually with students whose drafts show promise but unclear revision.

Extension Ideas Across the Unit

- Publish poems in a class "Book of Questions" displayed in the hallway or shared digitally.
- Partner with an art teacher: students illustrate one question from their poem as an abstract image.
- Invite students to research Neruda's life and connect the political context of his work to the questions he chose to ask.
- Use student poems as mentor texts for the next class—a meaningful full-circle moment.