

# Of Course, Poetry!

A Unit Plan  
for Teaching Contemporary Poetry  
using *Contemporary Verse 2*  
as a Resource  
(Senior 1-4)



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on behalf of *Contemporary Verse 2*  
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## Unit Overview and Objectives

This resource is the result of an informal needs assessment and interviews with English teachers who were willing to share their time and resources. Through discussions with educators, it was found that contemporary poetry, and poetry in general, was not being taught on a regular and comprehensive basis in the senior years. It was also felt that, generally speaking, students were not arriving at university ready to engage with or write poetry. In addition, teachers expressed a lack of access to contemporary poetry resources.

To fulfill these needs, *Contemporary Verse 2 (CV2)*, the Canadian Journal of Poetry and Critical Writing, has developed a unit plan that uses the journal (published quarterly) as a teaching resource. *CV2* can provide an ever increasing supply of current, high-quality contemporary poetry, organized into theme-related issues, for use in the classroom. The appeal of contemporary poetry to students is its unpredictable or experimental forms, relevant themes, and the immediacy of its language.

The objective of this unit is to allow students to explore and play with language, using contemporary poetry published in *CV2* as the inspiration. The goal is that by the end of the unit, students will have begun to develop their own poetic sensibilities, voice, and attain a higher comfort level responding to and communicating through the medium of poetry. The assessment of student work in this unit is not as much about grading as feedback. Grading should be encouraging, not punitive. As one very experienced and successful poetry teacher, Sid Korzinski, stated in his interview, “study writers and writing, not rubrics!” Expose students to great writing as exemplars, both published and written by their fellow classmates: “keep raising the bar instead of trying to fit them into a box.”

The unit is organized around the creation of a poetry journal which will chart the students’ growth in terms of discovering their own poetic voice and sensibilities. A scrap book, scissors, glue sticks, magazines, drawing and painting supplies, issues of *CV2*, and additional collections of poetry that you may have access to will be needed for this unit.

Encourage students to see their journals as a safe place to explore their own writing. It can include their own personal favourite poems or song lyrics, inspirations, pictures, and personal writing in addition to their assignments.

To achieve the most meaningful learning experience from this unit, students should have some previous experience responding to poetry in general, in terms of figurative language identification, emotion or nostalgia-based responses, close reading analysis, etc.

These lesson plans can be modified to suit particular grade levels.

# Lesson 1: What Makes a Great Poem?

Duration: 80 minutes class time

## Expected Outcomes

The students will:

1. Read and discuss a number of poems in a small group, working cooperatively.
2. Create an informal rubric with their teacher – a checklist of what constitutes “great poetry” to them – and in the process begin to develop aesthetic sensibilities concerning poetry which will assist them in their own writing.

## Materials

The teacher will make copies of a variety of poems from issues of *CV2* for the students to read in small groups. A range of poetic forms, themes and voices should be selected. If the teacher is aware of particular poems that have a strong impact on the reader in terms of emotion, humour, intensity, etc., these should be included. Some less provocative poems should also be included for the sake of comparison.

The teacher will also need to provide each group with chart paper.

## Instructions:

- I: Hand out a selection of poems to each group of 4-5 students. Instruct the students to pass around different poems to read to themselves. Then have the students take turns reading the poems aloud to the other members of their groups.
- II: Have the students select and discuss poems that they identify with or that stand out to them in terms of sound, meaning, image, etc. Why are these particular poems strong? Encourage the students to brainstorm about what elements make a great poem. You could also have the students underline words and phrases that they find compelling or inspiring in the poems.
- III: Have the students select a recorder to write down their group’s checklist, based on their discussion, of what makes a strong poem. Encourage students to be respectful of others’ ideas and differing responses to the same poem. Open a discussion – Why do poems touch readers differently? Underscore that the reader’s own particular background, experiences and experience with poetry affects their individual readings.
- IV: Assemble the groups together, and have each small group select a speaker to present their list. The teacher will create one large class checklist which includes all of the groups’ ideas. Discuss and highlight elements that all groups agree on as well as more individual preferences.

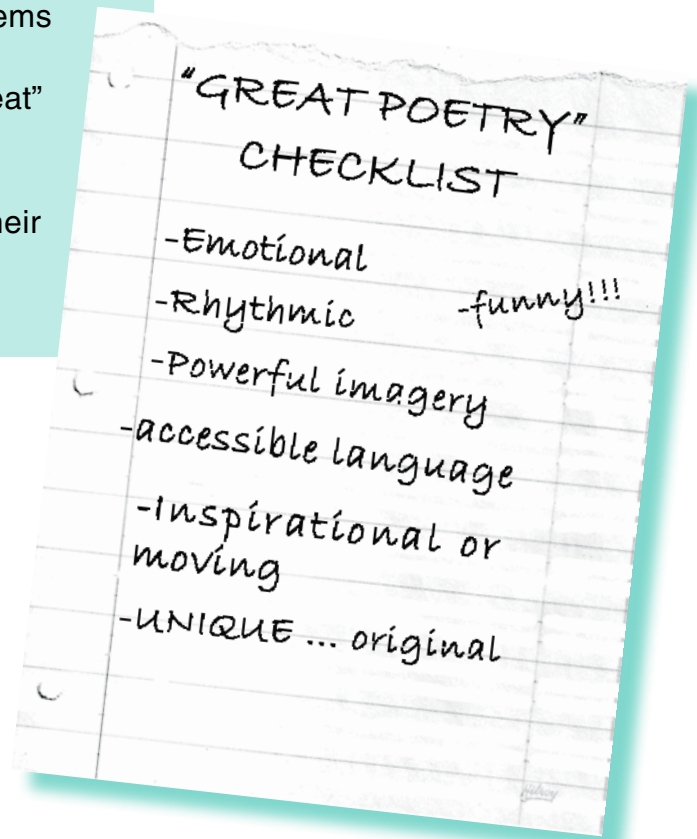
## Assessment

The students will participate in the creation of a class-generated checklist as to what constitutes a great poem. The guide will be hung in a prominent place in the room for the students to refer to and be inspired by as they create their own poetry during this unit. The checklist can also be used as a tool for grading by the teacher.

The students will also copy out the list and place it in their poetry journals along with a copy of one of their favourite poems from the activity.

## Go Further

Have the students write a review or a response to one of the poems from the activity. It could be a poem that they considered "great" or one of the poems that they didn't particularly care for. The students should substantiate their opinions in the review.



## Lesson 2: Get to know a CV2 Poet!

Duration: 80 minutes class time with extra time for library/internet research, or assign as homework. Variation: This assignment can be done individually or in pairs.

### Expected Outcomes

The student will:

1. Be exposed to a diverse group of *CV2* poets and select a poet who interests them.
2. Develop research skills as they investigate their selected poet.
3. Share their poet with their fellow students in an oral presentation.

### Materials

The teacher will make copies of poems from issues of *CV2*, from a diverse group of poets, for the students to select from. There should be enough variety for all students, or pairs of students, to be able to pick a different poet to research.

The students will need access to the library and the internet. Interviews, reviews, bios and essays from *CV2* are also valuable resources for this lesson. Issues should be made available to help with the students' research.

### Instructions

- I: Put out copies of poems and allow the students time to read through a number of poems, either individually or as a pair, and select a poet to research. They may already have a poet in mind from the previous lesson.
- II: Once all the students have selected a poet, outline the scope of the research assignment for the class. Instruct the students to find at least 2 other poems by their chosen poet and research and prepare a 10 minute presentation on their poet. The presentation should include: a brief bio, published work and some insight into the poet's writing process, influences and inspiration for writing.
- III: Give the students time to research in the library, on the internet and with additional issues of *CV2*, or assign the project as homework.
- IV: In a subsequent class, have the students present their poets in a 10 minute presentation to their fellow students. They should read a poem by their poet during the presentation.

## Assessment

1. Students will select a poet and research the poet and their work.
2. Students will make a 10 minute presentation on their poet to the class.
3. Students will place their written research work and 2 poems by their poet in their poetry journal.



## Go Further

Contact a CV2 poet and book them for a reading and a discussion about writing poetry for your class. Perhaps one or two of the students should even be given the opportunity to interview the poet! CV2, the Manitoba Writers' Guild, the Writers' Union of Canada, the League of Canadian Poets, University English Departments, and the poet's own publisher are all potential avenues to try and reach a particular poet.

## Lesson 3: Visual Poem

Duration: 80 minutes class time and homework

### **Expected Outcomes**

The students will:

1. Become more confident in their abilities to read and understand contemporary poetry.
2. Gain understanding of how the combination of image and text enhance meaning.
3. Learn how to respond to a poem in words and pictures, and communicate their own understanding of the poem in a creative way.

### **Materials**

The class will need copies of *CV2* poems that contain strong images, are issue-oriented or embedded with symbolism so that students have ample lines and phrases to decipher. The students will also need art supplies to draw and write with and will require the use of the library and the internet to research people, events, symbols, etc. in the poems.

### **Instructions**

- I: Allow the students time to read and select a poem to interpret.
- II: Instruct them to do a close reading of the poem, underlining words and phrases that they feel need deciphering – images, symbols, places, people, events, figures of speech, etc.
- III: Allow the students time to research words and phrases in the library or on the computer. Some research may have to be assigned as homework.
- IV: Have the students write out their poem and illuminate it in words and pictures.



## Assessment

1. The students will read a poem and research words and phrases to decipher its meaning.
2. The students will use illustrations and words to interpret the poem.
3. The students will place the illuminated poem in their poetry journals.



## Go Further

Have the students write their own poem and illuminate it. They can decipher it with drawings and text that explain the inspiration for the poem and enhance its meaning.

## Lesson 4: Image-Text Collage: My Poetic Voice

Duration: 80+ minutes class time and homework

### Expected Outcomes

The students will:

1. Explore the experiences, memories, inspirations and influences that will become part of their own poetic voice.
2. Communicate meaning through a melding of text and images.

### Materials

The students will need poster-board on which to construct their collages. Glue, paint, magazine pictures, scraps of fabric and paper will also be needed.

The students will require access to a wide variety of objects, places, and people that are or have been meaningful in their lives (much of the preliminary part of the project must be done as homework). Some may require a camera to capture images and ideas that they want to incorporate into their collages. Copies of poems from *CV2* in which the poet appears to be exploring an intimate part of her/his own life or past would be helpful.

### Instructions

- I: Have the students read the introspective poems as examples of ways to explore the meaning in their own lives.
- II: Explain to the students that they will be creating a poem collage of text and images about themselves. Describe what the project will generally look like and of what it will consist. If you like, create an example with your own personal materials to show them.
- III: Ask the students to explore their own memories, interests, inspirations and influences with the goal of discovering their own poetic voice. Considering their own backgrounds and experiences, what would they write about? The students should be allowed a set period of time to collect their significant articles and ideas for writing. Encourage them to take photographs of consequential objects, places and people they want to include in their collage. Older family photos could be scanned for use in the collage. They can also find favourite songs and quote lyrics onto the collage. The collage could even have an audio or video component.
- IV: Have the students bring their personal articles to class and allow them the time and materials needed to construct their collages. Encourage them to add their own writing, drawing, painting, and other media to the collage to enhance the meaning of the collected images and text.
- V: When the collages are complete, mount them in the classroom and keep them on display for the duration of the unit. The students can refer to their collage when in need of inspiration for their writing.

## Assessment

1. The students will explore meaningful aspects of their lives and collect personal articles to put on a collage of text and image.
2. The students will create a collage poem that attempts to capture their own poetic voice.



## Go Further

Have the students present their collages at an “art opening” held either in their classroom or the library, gym or theater. Invite other classrooms, teacher and parents to attend the opening. The students could open the show with a series of poetry readings of original or favourite poems. This “opening” could be scheduled as the “grand finale” of the unit and also include the students’ finished poetry journals.

## Lesson 5: Comparing Poetic Voices

Duration: 80 minutes class time and homework

### Expected Outcomes

The students will:

1. Be exposed to a variety of voices from *CV2* poems and develop an awareness of who is speaking in the poem.
2. Gain experience interacting with poetry by underlining clues as to the identity of the speaker and making notes right on the poems.
3. Learn terminology which will enhance their own reading and writing of poetry – such as the speaker's tone, personal voice (vernacular? Lyric?), intended audience, etc.
4. Share their ideas about the speakers in the large group setting.
5. Respond creatively by writing 2 poems of their own and experience the sensation of writing from different voices.

### Materials

The teacher will make copies of a variety of poems from issues of *CV2*, chosen on the basis of a unique or powerful speaker. Each student should have the same selection of approximately 6 poems.

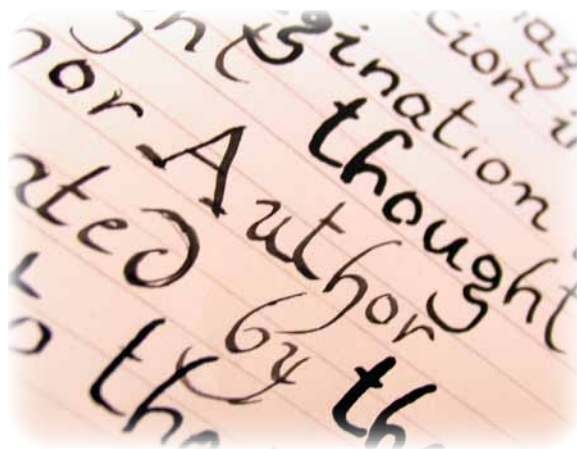
The teacher could also prepare 1 or 2 poems to go over on the overhead projector with the class as a whole and model the response techniques for the students.

### Instructions

- I: Hand out the bundles of poems to the students and instruct them to read them to themselves, paying attention to the speaker of the poem.
- II: Review the response technique for the students using a poem on the overhead projector, underlining clues as to the speaker's identity and making notes on the poem as to the speaker's tone, personal voice, intended audience, etc.
- III: Have the students re-read through their poems and respond to them in the same mode.
- IV: Assign the students to write 2 poems – one from their own voice and one vernacular poem using the voice of a historical literary character. The vernacular poem could also be from the point of view of a family member, friend, or even an animal. Encourage the students to be aware of the different approaches and feelings related to the experience of writing from different voices.

## Assessment

1. Students will participate in reading, discussing and responding to a group of poems in terms of their speakers. Students can select a few of their favourite voices and place those poems, along with their responses, in their poetry journals.
2. Students will produce two poems, each written from a different voice, one being personal, and place them in their poetry journals.



## Go Further

Have the students read their poems in small groups or to the class and discuss their different voices.

Have students write a paragraph expressing the different approaches and feelings related to the experience of writing from different voices. Place this paragraph with the 2 poems in their poetry journals.

## Lesson 6: Writing Back to the Poem

Duration: 80 minutes class time and homework

### Expected Outcomes

The students will:

1. Make an aesthetic choice, selecting a poem of interest to him/her from *CV2*.
2. Gain experience reading and responding to poetry in a number of ways, including cooperatively with a fellow student.
3. Respond creatively to their chosen poem with a poem of his/her own.

### Materials

The teacher will make copies of a wide variety of poems from issues of *CV2* for the students to select from.

The teacher could also provide examples of creative responses to poetry, such as parodies.

### Instructions

- I: Display copies of *CV2* poems. Allow the students time to browse through the poems and select one that is meaningful or aesthetically pleasing to them.
- II: Have the students familiarize themselves with their selected poems by reading through them numerous times. The students can read their poems to themselves and then share them aloud in pairs. Encourage students to take note of what they like or dislike about their poem, and choose a characteristic of the poem that stands out to them as they read it (its subject matter, tone, perspective, line breaks, imagery, etc.). Have the students discuss these aspects with their partners.
- III: Give the students general examples of ways to respond to poetry, or, if preferred, show them specific examples. Students will respond to their chosen poem by writing a poem that imitates its style or tone, or connects it to a new idea, subject matter or perspective. Encourage students to use the outcomes of their discussion as a starting point for their poems.



## Assessment

1. Students will participate in selecting a poem, and reading and discussing the poem with a partner.
2. Students will write a poem, inspired by a *CV2* poem of their choice, for their poetry journals. Both poems are to be included in the poetry journal.

## Go Further

If the students are comfortable sharing their work, they could also read their selected and written poems to the class or in small groups, and have the student explain if they chose to write a poem that imitates a style or tone, or connects it to a new idea.

## Lesson 7: The Modified Poem Experiment

Duration: 80 minutes class time

### Expected Outcomes

The students will:

1. Experiment with stylistic and grammatical elements of a poem such as line breaks and punctuation, as well as with figures of speech, tone, speaker, etc.
2. Gain a better understanding of the mechanics of a poem and the choices that poets make, and, in doing so, enhance their own writing skills.

### Materials

The teacher will need to make copies of poems from issues of *CV2* that have a variety of styles – free verse, prose poem, concrete poem, traditional stanzaic forms, etc. – for the class.

Have a poem on the overhead projector to modify and use as an example for the class.

### Instructions

- I: Distribute the poems and explain to the students that they will be choosing a poem to re-design in terms of style, figures of speech, etc.
- II: Have a class discussion about the different ways a poem can be altered to make it more effective in communicating its meaning or to change its meaning altogether.
- III: Allow the students time to read through a number of different poems and select one to modify.
- IV: Encourage students to think about why they made certain changes to the poem and how these changes affect the poem's meaning or impact. The students should explain their modification in a paragraph. How is the poem now different from its original form?



## Assessment

1. The students will select a poem to modify and participate in a class discussion about stylistic choices that poets make.
2. The students will modify a poem and explain the reasoning behind their changes in a written paragraph. The altered poem and the explanation will be placed in their poetry journals.

## Go Further

In pairs, the students read the same poem and each modify it in their own way. They could then compare the differences and similarities in their modified poems and explain their choices with their partner.

## Lesson 8: The Poem and the Process

Duration: 80-120 minutes class time (the time will vary depending on how much class time you allow for writing)

### **Expected Outcomes**

The students will:

1. Become comfortable communicating in the medium of poetry.
2. Be able to explain the process behind their poems, demonstrating an understanding of their poetic choices and inspirations.
3. Work cooperatively in pairs to support each other's writing.

### **Materials**

The students should have the “great poetry” checklist and their collages from Lesson 1 and Lesson 4 to refer to.

### **Instructions**

- I: Explain to the students that they will be writing a poem on the topic of their choice along with a process paper that explains their motivation for the poem and the stylistic choices.
- II: Allow the students some class time to at least get started writing their poem, in case they require your assistance. Encourage students to refer to their collages for ideas and the “great poetry” checklist for “quality control.”
- III: In a subsequent class, allow the students time to receive feedback on a draft of their poem from a partner. The students can read their poems to each other and offer compliments, encouragement and constructive criticism. The students can also practice explaining their poetic processes.
- IV: Taking into consideration the feedback from their partners, have the students edit their poems into a final draft and write the process paper. Some students may also want feedback from the teacher before finishing their final draft. If a student chooses not to incorporate feedback into the final draft of their particular poem, they should explain why in their process paper.

## Assessment

1. The students will participate in a peer feedback activity.
2. The students will complete a poem and process paper explaining their poem and place them in their poetry journals.



## Go Further

Have the students continue writing poetry for their journals on a regular basis. Encourage students to enter one of their poems in a poetry contest or send it to a publication accepting submissions (The Claremont Review and the Pandora Poetry Contest are two places to send poetry). Review the submission process with the class.



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