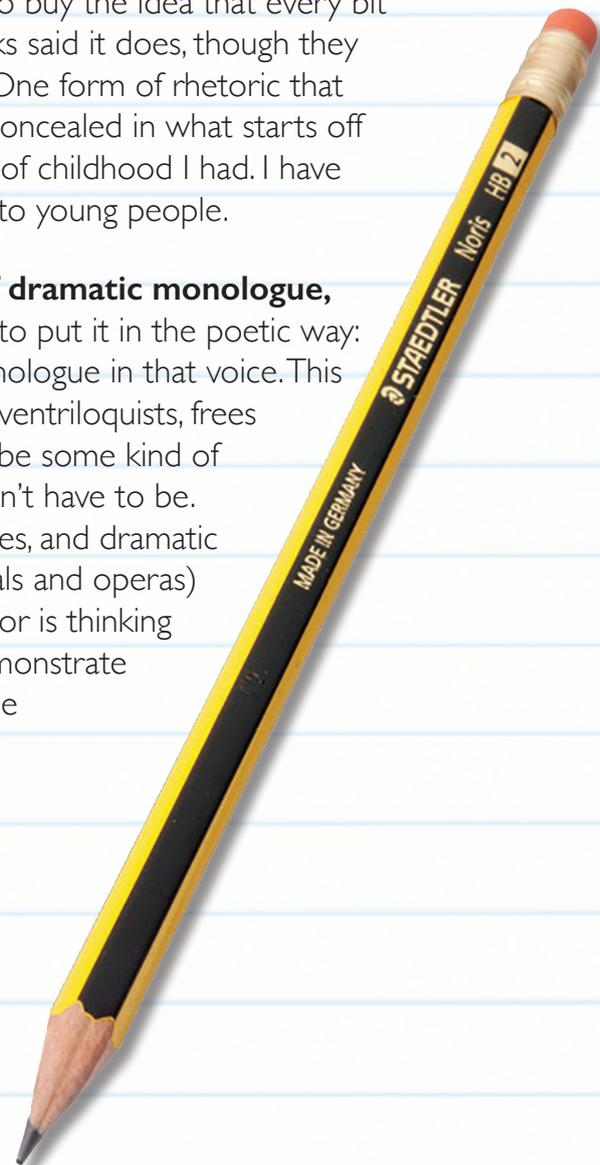


Michael Rosen's notes for teachers



- 1. One way to think about writing** is that any piece of writing you hear or read is a trigger for you to say to yourself, 'I could write like that.' That simple phrase can mean a lot of things: write something in the same rhythm, on the same subject, using some of the ideas or feelings in the piece, imitating the structure, 'borrowing' bits of it. Or it can mean something a bit more vague but just as important: something along the lines of, 'As I read that (or heard it), it reminded me of something that happened to me (or to someone I know, or someone I heard about) and now I want to write about that..' All these 'responses' are good and OK reasons to get writing. When the students hear me, I want them to feel free to imitate, borrow, be inspired to write whatever they want. I hope that close attention to what I'm saying will enable that to happen in many, many different ways.
- 2. Performance poetry is a 'bridge'** between the way we speak and the way we write. When we speak, the language we use rushes by, and it's hard to 'catch it' so that we can inspect it or think about it. When we write, we tend to make ourselves sound more formal, more standoffish, not very emotional. It is sometimes difficult for students – or any of us – to become as fluent in writing as we are in speech. For some students this process of getting things down on the page is an obstacle. The great advantage of poetry and performance-poetry is that you can use a lot of what we know very well in speech: phrases, rhythms, ways of saying things, and put them into writing. It's as if we are 'talking on to the page'. Of course it's not the only way to write, but it's one way to discover a 'voice', one way to discover that we can write using something that most of us are actually quite fluent in: talking. I will show one of the ways that I learned to write was by 'talking on to the page'.

3. **Our families are a huge resource for writing.** They are like reservoirs of feeling, ideas, memories and thought. I will demonstrate this in terms of how I have asked questions and found out things in my family and written about them. Some of this might be quite shocking as it involves discoveries to do with the Holocaust. But writing is in part about helping ourselves process things that are uncomfortable or disturbing. I will talk about this in relation to the death of my son, as well. Writing is a way of 'releasing' thoughts that are pent up in our heads, so instead of 'brooding' we can 'look at' what we write, because it's there on the page.
4. **We can make 'structures' in writing in many different ways:** rhythm, rhyme are the most well-known but we can create more informal ones through repetition. This gives a reader or an audience a way of participating, acting as a chorus or an audience that participates in what we are doing. It makes for poetry and writing to be public and communal. I will show this.
5. **The ancient Greeks thought about writing in terms of the effects** that this or that kind of writing might have. They divided it all up into categories under the heading of 'Rhetoric'. We don't have to buy the idea that every bit of rhetoric has the effect that the Ancient Greeks said it does, though they might be right some or even most of the time. One form of rhetoric that interests me is 'hyperbole', especially when it is concealed in what starts off sounding like an everyday matter, like what kind of childhood I had. I have found that this way of writing is quite appealing to young people.
6. **A lot of what I write is in essence a form of dramatic monologue,** often in the mouth of the child I once was – or to put it in the poetic way: I take on the persona of a child and write a monologue in that voice. This idea of poets taking on voices, being actors and ventriloquists, frees students up from thinking that all poetry has to be some kind of confession or absolutely true. It can be but doesn't have to be. There's a long tradition of soliloquies, monologues, and dramatic monologues in poetry and song (think of musicals and operas) where the 'voice' says what he or she has done, or is thinking or what plans he or she has and so on. I will demonstrate how you can do that very easily, particularly if the monologue is based on some version of your self from the past.
7. **I will show how written, published stories, films and plays are a resource** we can use in another way: to imitate, adapt and invent.



Further Reading

For further reading, where I explore these ideas and others try *What is Poetry? The Essential Guide to Reading and Writing Poems* (Walker Books). It's suitable for students and staff. There are ideas about ways of reading creatively in the book too.

In my Hay Festival schools event I will draw on poems and stories from:

Michael Rosen's Big Book of Bad Things (Puffin)

You Wait Till I'm Older Than You (Puffin)

Jelly Boots, Smelly Boots (Bloomsbury)

Bah! Humbug! (Scholastic)

Unexpected Twist (Scholastic)

There are also several books about writers for lower secondary school students:

What's so Special about Shakespeare? (Walker Books)

What's so Special about Dickens? (Walker Books)

And several co-authored non-fiction books for lower secondary school students:

What is Humanism? (Wayland)

Who are Refugees and Migrants? (Wayland)

What is Right and Wrong? (Wayland)



Michael Rosen is taking part in Hay Festival's Schools Programme on 23 & 24 May 2019.