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Who Said That?: Poems for Two Voices

Poems for two voices are poems that are written specifically for two people (or two groups of people) to perform out loud together. Each person usually reads some lines out loud solo, and then both people read some lines together.

Here's an example of a poem I wrote for two voices:

Gemini – A Poem for Two Voices

Voice 1

Together

Voice 2

Twin ideas

Discover

Explore

Dance together

Hover

Circle

Fourteen days

Emotion

Of grand

End with splash-

Ocean

down in the

Caption: Two Gemini spacecraft circle each other during Gemini 7's 14-day journey in 1965. People on Earth were nervous about the long mission, and everyone celebrated when Gemini 7 landed in the ocean as planned with its two astronauts safe inside.

I wrote that for *And Then There Were Eight: Poems About Space*, but it didn't end up in the book (I always wrote extra poems for my Capstone poetry books).

You'll notice right off that these poems have a special format on the page. Generally, one speaker's lines are in a column at the left. The second speaker's lines are in a column at the right. And lines that they speak in unison are in a center column (sometimes in bold).

I think there are circumstances in which these poems work especially well.

- When you have two specific "characters." For instance, I wrote about California in my 50 State Poems collection. I used the two voices to represent the two sides of land across the San Andreas Fault. They're arguing and shoving back and forth, representing the pressure of the two tectonic plates pushing against each other.
- When you want to play off one poem against another. This is kind of like harmonizing in a song. For Colorado, I wrote this:

Colorado: Pink Lady
(A Poem for Two Voices)

Long hike down through misty clouds,
A dizzying descent
Rocks, ravines, and evergreens—
That clean-scrubbed pine tree scent
Pikes Peak, the watchman of the west,
You rise from plains below
Rosy granite etched with ice
You wear the sunset's glow

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

**America,
America
Land beautiful
and free**

- And third, any poem that would be fun to read out loud this way!

I think that rhymed poems work better for this form, because they're easier to read out loud in unison. But free verse can be powerful, too. Read *A Graduation Poem for Two*: <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/fear/poem2.html>. It's a lovely poem from the POV of a teacher and a student, and it does a great job of revealing the surprising things that they have in common. This is the effect that a poem for two voices can achieve so wonderfully.

Teachers love poems for two voices because kids love them. It's easier to perform a poem (which many states have as a language arts standard) if you're not standing in front of the class all by yourself. It's great practice for both fluency and poetry appreciation!

It's also a fun way for kids to practice seeing two sides of a situation. Look at these powerful poems exploring the Japanese and American viewpoints in WWII:

<http://pketko.com/Hiroshima/poems.htm>.

And finally, listen to these kids reciting some poems for two voices that they wrote:

<http://youthradio.wordpress.com/2007/04/28/poems-for-two-voices/>

One of my favorite poetry collections is *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*, by Paul Fleischman. Who knew that a collection of poems about bugs could be so delightful?

You can read one excerpt here (*Water Boatmen*:

<http://www.pflugervilleisd.net/curriculum/ela/grade6/documents/ExcerptfromJoyfulNoise.pdf>) and another here (*Fireflies*: <http://www.paulfleischman.net/disc.htm>).

Notice that Fleischman formats his a little differently. For lines he wants both readers to say simultaneously, he puts them in both readers' columns. Whatever works! As long as your readers can decipher your intention, it's all good. And this collection is beyond good.

Fleischman has other multi-voice collections, too: *Big Talk: Poems for Four Voices* and *I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices*. They're both full of excellent examples of this form, too, though *Joyful Noise* is the standout, to me.

So how do you write this form?

To write a traditional poem for two voices, I think the key is in identifying the two points of view you will present in your poem.

What voices might you choose? Rain and sun? Winter and summer? American Indian and European settler? Two friends arguing over something?

And then you need to do lots of brainstorming about what they both want/need to express in your poem. And then you look for areas of overlap. What phrase might they both say, even if the phrase means different things for both of them? Is there a refrain they might say together? What would they agree or disagree about?

If the two voices are really separate, I might write each "poem" separately and then try to figure out how to merge them. If they're speaking directly *to* each other, then I need to write the poem one line at a time, giving it the push and pull of conversation.

Here's a poem for two voices I just wrote to submit to a peace project. The organizer was asking for poems, quotations, and prose pieces related to peace, and I decided I wanted to try to contrast the life of a girl living in the suburban U.S. with the life of a girl living in a refugee camp in Africa.

Unexpected Links

A Suburban Girl

I wish I had my own room.
My sister tore my
Jonas Brothers poster
and lost my mood ring.

Sometimes, I hang a sheet over
the couch and table to make
a private place,

a dark, green tent

is our world.
Seven of us inside, but we all fit
because we have only
woven mats on the dirt floor and
the tattered clothes we wear and the
possibility of

sun filtering in

wakes me

every morning,

I ignore my cavernous stomach.
When the whirr of helicopter blades
announces food,
I scramble out
to be first in the cloudy line
for sorghum,
which we resell for
small amounts of real food.
That is what I do

When I am hungry

I search the refrigerator
and Mom yells at me
to stop wasting
electricity. I quick pick
string cheese and apple juice
for my snack. I grab
graham crackers and juice for

my little sister

was hurt yesterday
by men who thundered into
our camp on horseback,
men who pointed fire at us all

and I wish my father were here
but we had to leave him behind
and I do not know if he is all right

I miss my father

when he is out of town
fixing hospital machines
instead of home with us
But he says
he is lucky to have a job
When he comes home,
he always brings me

a toy

can be anything
We stuffed a sorghum sack
with old newspapers
and played soccer
for three hours yesterday
while our mothers listened
for hoofbeats in the distance
or metal birds in the sky
and we pretended
not to be scared and
tried to concentrate on

right now

my mom is
crying as she watches
the news on t.v.
Children, she says,
deserve

Freedom

from fear

Hope

for a future

Peace

in

our

world

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In this poem, I wanted to take two kids with totally different experiences and have their words overlap at times, showing both how similar in yearning but how different in fact their two lives are. They both would like their own space, safety, food, family...but only one has it.

That's the second draft of it, but it didn't change much from the first draft. The first draft had two segments in a row for the refugee girl, and I wanted to change it to be a true back and forth, so I inserted the

wakes me

every morning,

after the "sun filtering in." And I tightened up just a few phrases here and there. I think this might be the first time I've written an unrhymed poem for two voices, and I'm fairly happy with it. The language probably needs a bit more specificity, and I'll tinker some more with it. But overall, the form allowed me to accomplish what I wanted to.

On the other hand, sometimes it's fun just to take a standard (usually rhyming) poem I've written and break it into a poem for two voices (as I did in *Gemini*). In that case, I start playing around with different ways to break it up, trying to give each person a somewhat equal number of lines. I also try to choose the words that get the most emphasis for both people to speak together, since they'll be the loudest.

No matter what kind of poem for two voices you're creating, reading out loud is essential. It's even better if you can get someone to read it with you, so that you can truly hear it in two different voices. More than any other form, I think poems for two voices require repeated readings aloud as you revise and tweak. It's very much a matter of rhythm and how it sounds.

Eavesdrop on conversations around you, listen to some current R&B and hip hop music, or, if you're really lucky (ha!), listen to a few arguments. Pay attention to the give and take, the actions and reactions, the rhythm of two voices interacting with each other. Then try to capture some of those same rhythms in your own poem!

--*Laura Purdie Salas is a poet and writer for kids. Her newest book is **Stampede! Poems to Celebrate the Wild Side of School!** See stampedebook.com for more info.*