

# LAURA PURDIE SALAS

*small writes for brighter days*

## 15 WORDS OR LESS POEMS

For quite a few years, I hosted 15 Words or Less Thursdays on my blog. I shared an image and a poem first draft that was—you guessed it—15 words or less. That's the only rule. The title of the poem is not included in the word count. This is a super simple activity that kids really respond to because it's not intimidating, and I love that.

**Grade level:** All

**Time:** 5-10 minutes

## HERE ARE THE STEPS

1. Display an image
2. Talk through a few thoughts you have upon seeing the image.
  - a. What's in the image?
  - b. What might be happening?
  - c. Does it remind you of anything from your own life or experiences?
3. Depending on students' age, pass out index cards or sticky notes...something small
4. Set a timer for 3-5 minutes (sometimes even only 2 minutes!)
5. Write
6. Share and encourage each other

Remind students that:

- the poem doesn't have to actually describe the image
- this is just a first draft
- no rhyme is needed
- the limit is 15 words (not counting the title)

### 15 Words or Less Poems

#### Library Bike Rack

Park my bike  
Park my words  
Park myself

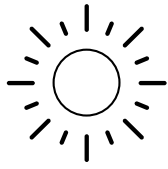
Here, I can hear  
and be heard

--Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved

**a weekly 1st-draft exercise**

[laurasalas.com/blog](http://laurasalas.com/blog)

As a visiting author, I've done this exercise with many students. The first time, some of them are shocked at the short deadline. But they quickly learn how freeing it is. When you're writing that fast, you don't have time to judge. You just write. I adore that when I start the timer and say, "Go!" the only sound I hear is pens and pencils scratching on paper. There's no better sound in the world!



# LAURA PURDIE SALAS

*small writes for brighter days*

## EXAMPLES

You can see all **my archived 15 Words or Less posts** here:  
<https://www.laurasalas.com/cat-page-15-words-or-less-poems/>

And here's a set of examples I sometimes share with students. These show a variety of moods and approaches.



Rumbling on, rolling through  
A small chipmunk stops to view  
His favorite friend

--Amelia

### Royal Steel

Majestic engine chuffs.  
Steel veil trails behind.  
Amber waves of grain bow in her wake.

--Jean James

### Good-Bye

Clickety-clack  
Rickety-rack  
Riding all day  
With my back-pack  
Slickety-slack  
Trickety-track  
Leaving today  
Ain't comin' back!

--Donna JT Smith

### 15 Words or Less Poems

#### Passing Through

Trains rumbled through his childhood,  
endless and rolling,  
all the places he would never go

--Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved

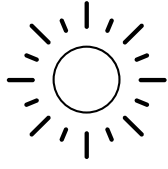
a weekly 1st-draft exercise

[laurasalas.com/blog](http://laurasalas.com/blog)

### Books

Trains with paper engines  
Alphabets of wills  
Words snaking  
Paper tack pulling  
Paper cubs  
Distention unknown  
--Jessica Bigi

But you can find plenty of other examples by going to the archived posts. You're free to share my images or to find your own to inspire your students. Have fun with this!



# LAURA PURDIE SALAS

*small writes for brighter days*

## THINGS TO DO IF... POEMS

I've written Things to Do If... poems for many years with students of all ages. Its unique construction forces writers to use language in a different way. Because of that, a poem written in this way instantly feels more...poetic, somehow. Give it a try!

**Grade level:** All

**Time:** 10 minutes for group poem

## SHARE EXAMPLES

First, share some sample Things to Do If... poems. Here are some by me and by groups of students.

### **Things to Do if You Are a Macaroni Noodle**

Invite all your friends to a party  
Soak in a hot bath until you're  
    completely relaxed  
Dress in sharp cheddar layers  
Wear a scratchy cracker cap  
Sunbathe under an electric sky  
Bubble over with happiness

– © Laura Purdie Salas

### **Things To Do If You're a Rope Swing**

Wear a bristly jacket.  
Leap to the sky.  
Float safely back to earth.

– © Laura Purdie Salas

Group poems written with students

### **Things To Do if You Are a Ship**

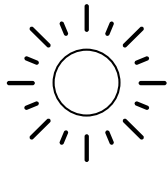
Wear striped cloth  
    and wooden shoes  
Dance in swerves to the  
    music of the waves  
Hope for sailors to steer you  
Fly across the water

### **Things To Do if You Are a Firework**

Wear straight clothes  
    that make up a tutu  
Shout out loud, "Happy Birthday!"  
Whisper when you whistle up  
    into the air  
Wish to explode!

## NEXT STEPS

- Guide students to notice that a verb/action word begins every line.
- Discuss with students whether the topic of the poem can literally take these actions. "Can a dandelion give high fives?" Chat about personification, where writers give nonhuman things the ability to do human actions.
- Share an image with the class. A clear, colorful, not too busy image works best. I've used things like a ship, a bumblebee buzzing around a flower, and a firework.
- Brainstorm a list of things the kids know about the object. Jot down words that answer questions like:
  - Where do we see this?
  - What's it made of?
  - What noises does it make?
  - What does this thing do?

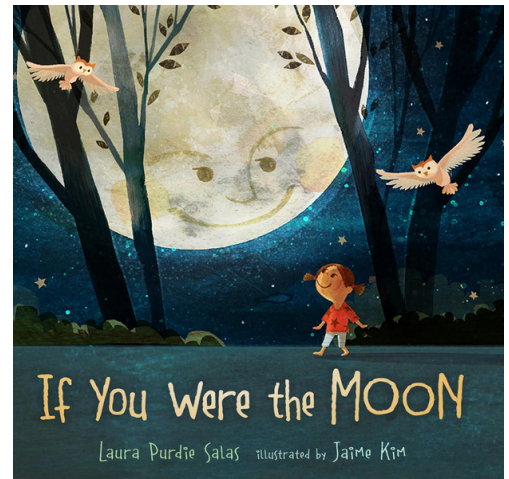


# LAURA PURDIE SALAS

*small writes for brighter days*

- Choose a verb to start the first line with. (Wear, skip, chase, etc.) Don't pick a verb that makes sense with the topic. For example, if your topic's a firework, don't pick "explode" to start the line. Invite a volunteer to finish the line.
- I often start with "wear." I'll say something like, "Now, does a roller coaster really wear clothes?" After they tell me it doesn't, I'll ask someone to describe what they would tell the roller coaster to wear, in a way that tells us a little something about a real roller coaster. So I might get responses like, "Wear a metal dress." Or, "Wear a bright red shirt." That first answer works well, but the second answer could literally describe a person. So then I'll say, "That's great! Who can add another word or two so that we tell the reader this isn't a regular bright red shirt?" Then we might end up adding something like "curvy" or "steel" or "screaming." Something that makes the line more interesting! Remind students that they can pull words from the brainstorming list.

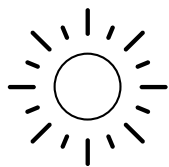
My book ***If You Were the Moon*** began as this kind of poem. You can read this book with students before or after writing a group poem and ask students which lines they think were part of the original poem.



- Continue on, giving a new verb to start each line and inviting a volunteer to finish the line. For the last line, I often use "wish" or "dream" as the first word. "Imagine this ship could have one wish come true. What do you think it would wish for?"
- Read the complete draft aloud and celebrate the group's nifty new poem!

***You can find more examples of this poetic form on my website:***

***<https://www.laurasalas.com/tag/things-to-do-if/>***



# LAURA PURDIE SALAS

*small writes for brighter days*

## BIOPOEMS

Teachers introduced me to the biopoem, which usually uses a person as a topic. But I love to have students write about things that aren't even alive!

**Grade level:** K-2 (probably just the group poem); 3-adult (the whole shebang)

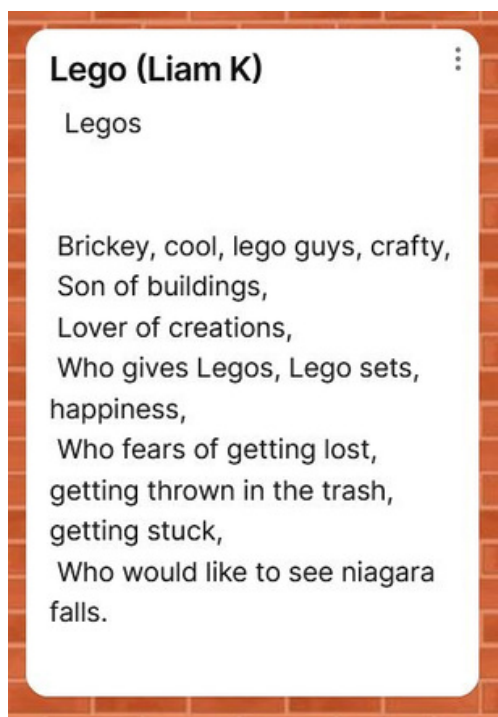
**Time:** 45 minutes if you move quickly and write just a few lines

## BIOPOEM FORMAT

**Show students the format** of a biopoem and **read a couple of samples.**

Biopoem Format

1. First name
2. Four adjectives
3. Child of (x) and (y)
4. Lover of (3 things)
5. Who feels (3 different feelings and when they are felt)
6. Who gives (3 things)
7. Who fears (3 things)
8. Who would like to see (3 things)
9. Who lives (brief description)
10. Who (wild card)
11. Last name



*student poem*

## EXAMPLES

Here's one of mine that uses the entire form—all 11 lines—and one from a student.

### **Airplane Flight**

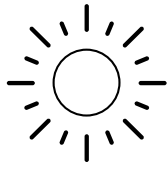
by Laura Purdie Salas

takeoff  
 rushing, rolling, slanting, flying!  
 child of ground and sky  
 lover of clouds, sunshine, and lift  
 who feels scared of lightning, awed at  
 mountains, and free as a bird  
 who gives family reunions, emergency  
 care, and adventure  
 who fears volcanic ash, thunderstorms,  
 and flocks of geese  
 who would like to see long runways,  
 sunsets, and happy people  
 who lives in hangars, on tarmacs,  
 and above the clouds  
 who will see you safely home...  
 landing

### **Sleepovers** (*Marley, 3rd grade*)

Sleepovers  
 Soft, cozy, blankets.  
 Daughter of popping popcorn.  
 Lover of friends, fun and happiness.  
 Who feels fun, kindness and love.  
 Who gives presents, candy and care  
 Who fears to sleep in the dark,  
 and in different bed  
 Who would like to see the imaginative  
 life with friends  
 Who lives a non-imaginative lonely life  
 with no friends  
 But now it's okay that now i have  
 friends.  
 Slumber Party





# LAURA PURDIE SALAS

*small writes for brighter days*

## GROUP TOPIC

### Choose a topic for a group poem.

I like to let kids vote among several images: a firework, an alligator, a rocket, and a sailing ship, for example.

### Chat about common words.

If your topic's "a baseball," ask each student to write 3 words that describe a baseball. Ask, "Who has 'round' on your list?" And then "white." Probably many hands will go up. Common words spill from our brains first. There's nothing wrong with them, as they declutter our head so we can think of more unusual, distinctive words!

## BRAINSTORM

As a group, **brainstorm 10-20 words** related to the topic. After a few common words, push for unique, specific words, too. Ask, "What's a word you're thinking of that maybe nobody else has thought of?" Here's a group sample about "firework":

booming	flashing
outburst	like fire
burst of color	bright
colorful	extreme
exploding	sparkles
POP	powerful
4th of July	loud
light of sparks	colorful sparks
shiny	sulfur
dazzling	isolated

## DRAFT

**Show the structure of a biopoem again.** As a group, write a quick, complete biopoem draft. Give lots of encouragement and affirmation.

**Remind kids not to judge** the first draft. The group poem might not hang together because so many students contribute.



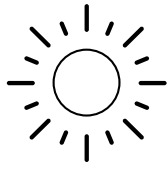
## INDIVIDUAL TOPIC

Next, **students choose individual topics.** Something they love or fear makes a good topic.

Hand out **distinctive paper or large index cards** for students to write their poem on.

Students **brainstorm for 2-4 minutes.** You could toss out a few prompts, such as:

- feelings
- places
- smells
- textures
- colors
- tastes
- sounds
- steps of a process
- objects associated with it
- favorite moment
- why it's important
- why it's funny
- why it's sad
- What detail or secret do YOU know about your topic that most people don't know? [This one's usually a favorite.]



# LAURA PURDIE SALAS

*small writes for brighter days*

**Paint: Clayton F. (5-27-16)**

**COLORFUL**

who fears dullness and hatred  
who proves creativity  
who gives happiness, satisfaction  
and love

ACRYLIC

*student poem*

## STUDENT EXAMPLES

### **Gymnastics** (Scarlett G)

Son of strength  
Daughter of flips  
Who sheds tears, rips skin, gives  
high fives and smiles

### **Minecraft** (Alex H)

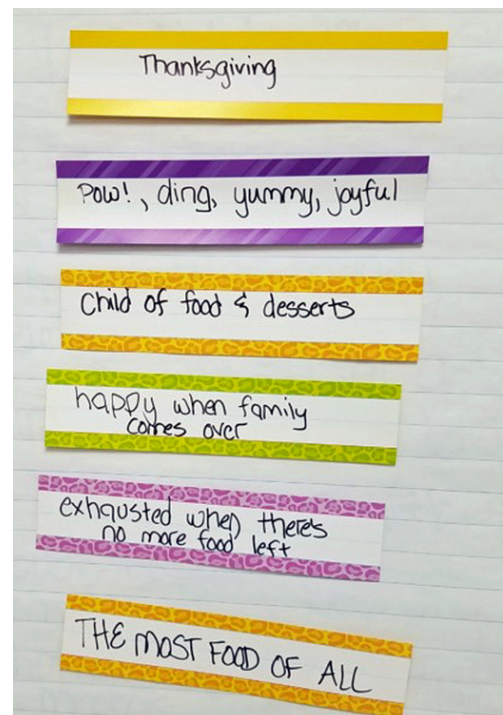
Son of Notch  
Son of programming  
Who is adventurous and  
wondrous  
Cave game

## WRITE!

**Students write mini biopoems.** They come up with their **first and last lines first**. Since their topics aren't people, ask students to get creative for their first and last lines. They come up with some fabulous ideas!

Then students **write middle lines**. (How many? It depends how much time you have.) You can have fun choosing which lines. Draw numbered ping pong balls, roll dice, count letters in a student's name, etc. Read the number out loud, and then students write that line from the form. For the last of the middle lines, let kids choose which one they want. Or assign your own favorite! Mine is #3, "Child of X and Y." Something about that prompt draws wonderful lines from students.

**Invite volunteers to share** their poems and **celebrate** all the efforts.



*3rd grade group poem*