

My Identity Poem

This activity is simply meant to be an exploration of identity. Students and caregivers may (and, in the case of the youngest students, should) work together to determine how each student will approach the exercise. There is no right way to begin, no right way to write a poem. This should be fun, maybe surprising, but not stressful.

“Who am I?” is a question we all ask at different times in our lives. It is an especially critical question for young people as they search for ways to begin to define themselves. How does identity form and change? To what extent are we defined by our talents and interests; by our ethnicity; by our social and economic status; by our religion? How do we see ourselves? How do others see us? Do we have more than one identity?

Take a moment to review and complete the worksheet included with this activity. You may be surprised by what you’ve never wondered about before, or how certain aspects of your identity seem bigger or smaller than others.

There is also a word bank of interesting words and phrases. Don’t think too much about it, just read over the list and circle anything that jumps out at you.

Now look at your completed worksheet, think about the interesting words or phrases that you circled, and consider the following questions:

- What are group identities and which groups am I a part of?
- What does it mean to feel good about myself?
- How can I express that I like who I am?
- How can I be proud of who I am and celebrate others?

Identity is a difficult concept, and thinking about your own identity may feel overwhelming. Poetry is a very powerful tool to visualize and organize thoughts and feelings and questions.

Poems can be many things. They can follow a formal structure with a specific word or syllable count. There can be a distinct rhyme pattern. (There are some examples after the word bank.)

But poems do not have to rhyme or use correct grammar or complete sentences. Poetry often uses metaphors and comparisons or descriptive language. Punctuation can be used, but it is not required. Sometimes a poem looks a little like a short story. Sometimes it looks like a random collection of words.

In an acrostic, the first line of each poem must begin with the corresponding letter of your name, but there are no rules beyond that. Each line can have many or few or a varied number of words.

What kind of poem will you write?

If you go through these pages and are still stuck, check the final two pages for George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From” poem, another sample “Where I’m From” poem, and a template to help you create your own version!

This activity is about and for you. However, if when you’ve completed your poem you’d like to share, we’d love to see them! If that’s OK with you, email your poem to hesequity@gmail.com.

Who Am I?

What's my name?

Name, nickname, meaning of name, etc.

How do I look?

Hair color/texture/length, eye color, complexion, height, body shape, birthmarks, etc.

Where do I come from?

Country of origin, where ancestors are from, Black, White, Latino/Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Multiracial, etc.

Who is my family?

Family structure, siblings, where family is from, activities/traditions my family has, etc.

What do I like and dislike?

Hobbies, interests, food, games, sports, animals, music, etc.

Where do I live?

State/city, urban/rural/suburban, people in my neighborhood/community, stores, services, etc.

What am I known for?

Playing sports or an instrument, drawing, cooking, etc.

What do I want to be known for?

Hidden talents, ambitions, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" etc.

Other important things about me:

Interesting Word and Phrases

ONLINE BEARD COUSIN SCHOOL BUS JUMPING SLEEPY SUBWAY
STRIPES LONG HAIR AFRO CURLS RAINY DAY CRYING CAMPFIRE
MY UNCLE BAND-AID CRUTCHES MONKEY BARS FIREFIGHTER ROAD TRIP
BLUES FORTUNE LOOSE CHANGE SLEEPING BAG POPSICLE ANGRY
DUMPLINGS OUCH CRYING SLIDE TIPTOED SLEEPING BAG BUTTER
DEAD OF WINTER HAMSTER TRICKLE WHY DON'T YOU EYES LIPSTICK
PUPPY DOG EYES RED LAUGHING WALK TO SCHOOL GRANDPA RED RIDING HOOD
SPRING SINGING RAINING CATS AND DOGS RUNNING POLKA DOTS
SWINGING MANGO COWS PARADE EASTER BONNET BASEBALL SWIMMING
SLED CANDY STORE MISMATCHED SOCKS MEXICO HALLOWEEN PRESIDENT
BELLS BIRACIAL UNDERSTANDING GUITAR BROWN MOUSTACHE
SNOWFLAKES SUSHI COLLARD GREENS BRAIDS SUNSHINE LUNAR NEW YEAR
DOCTOR TRACK BESIDES SUBWAY BROTHER PLANET COCONUT
NIGHTMARE HOT FUDGE SUNDAE TOPPING FRECKLES IMMIGRATED PLANE RIDE
MY COUSIN SNOWFLAKES PURPLE DREAMING TYPING SWIMMING POOL
CHICKEN SOUP TAMALES CHERRIES TRADITION STRIPES BLUE BEADS
NIGHTMARE BELLY ACHE PUMPKIN CROOKED HATCHED CHICKENS
WATER LILIES ADOPTED PLAYING JACKS SISTER UNIVERSE WEDDING
TWINKLE SWEET DREAMS GRANDMA AT THE LAKE CANOE ENVIOUS
IN MY BED SUMMER CAMP I DON'T KNOW GREEN DOMINOES UNDERNEATH
BARNYARD WHY TELEPHONE HURTING JUST BECAUSE SCRAMBLED EGGS
GRANDMA'S HOUSE CALICO CAT SNOW PUDDLE RADIO SANTA CLAUS
ORANGE MENORAH CURLY BALLOONS

Sample Poems

Olivia (an acrostic)

Olive skin, brown eyes, short kinky hair
Likes many things including macaroni and cheese, skateboarding, going on trips, minecraft
Include my best friend and brother in most things
Veterinarian someday, that is my dream
Interracial Family makes me who I am
Animals are always on my mind

Narcissa by Gwendolyn Brooks

Some of the girls are playing jacks.
Some are playing ball.
But small Narcissa is not playing
Anything at all.

Small Narcissa sits upon
A brick in her back yard
And looks at tiger-lilies,
And shakes her pigtailed hard.

First she is an ancient queen
In pomp and purple veil.
Soon she is a singing wind.
And next a nightingale.

How fine to be Narcissa,
A-changing like all that!
When sitting still, as still, as still
As anyone ever sat.

We Live by What We See at Night

by **Martín Espada**

for my father

When the mountains of Puerto Rico
flickered in your sleep
with a moist green light,
when you saw green bamboo hillsides
before waking to East Harlem rooftops
or Texas barracks,
when you crossed the bridge
built by your grandfather
over a river glimpsed
only in interrupted dreaming,
the craving for that island birthplace
burrowed, deep
as thirty years' exile,
constant as your pulse.

This was the inheritance
of your son, born in New York:
that years before
I saw Puerto Rico,
I saw the mountains
looming above the projects,
overwhelming Brooklyn,
living by what I saw at night,
with my eyes closed.

My Name

from *The House on Mango Street*

by **Sandra Cisneros**

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza. I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

"I Am From" Poem Template

Use this template to draft your poem, and then write a final draft to share on blank paper.

I am from _____
(specific ordinary item)

From _____ and _____
(product name) (product name)

I am from the _____
(home description, where you grew up or where you feel at home)

_____, _____, _____
(adjective) (adjective) (sensory detail)

I am from _____,
(plant, flower, natural item)

(description of above item)

I'm from _____ and _____
(family or community tradition) (family trait)

From _____ and _____
(name of family member) (another family or "like family" name)

I'm from the _____ and _____
(description of family tendency) (another one)

From _____ and _____
(something you were told as a child) (another)

I'm from _____,
(representation of culture or religion) (further description)

I'm from _____
(your roots: place of birth, family ancestry, etc)

_____, _____
(a food item that represents you or your family) (another one)

From the _____
(specific family story about a specific person and detail)

The _____
(another detail of another family member)

(location of family pictures, mementos, archives)

(line explaining the importance of family items)

Where I'm From

By George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.
I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.
I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments—
snapped before I budded—
leaf-fall from the family tree.

I Am From

A sample

I am from orange newts,
From the Flying Turtle and The Wizard of Oz.
I am from the foothills of the Berkshires and New York City nights--
alien, wild, alive.
I am from the Monk's Cave
and caves of mountain laurel.
I'm from go-cart races, buckeyes and bravado,
from Carol-hyphen-Lyn and Auntie Ive.
I'm from the stiff upper lip and a hard day's work,
from *a Milan* and "the system is down."
I'm from church on Sundays, then never,
from the gypsies, gnocchi, chilled chianti.
I'm from mixing baking soda and vinegar in my little brother's mouth,
the first in a litany of questionable decisions,
and the cluttered basement brimming with broken trophies, moldy yearbooks and boxes of slides.
I'm from keeping everything, so that the best things are always close at hand.