

Teaching Guide
***Ways to Beg* by T.J. Sandella**

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Creative Writing Prompts Inspired by *Ways to Beg*

- Write a poem that ends with a question. This question should lend itself to mutual inquiry, raising ethical or philosophical concerns that are not easily answerable and with which the reader can participate. For examples, see “Arrival,” “Abracadabra,” “After Driving Behind a Truck with a ‘Redneck Romeo’ Bumper Sticker,” “Pathology of Violence,” “Diptych,” or “Psalm I.”
- Write your own creation or origin story. Where do you come from? Who taught you? How did you come to be the way that you are?
- In her poem “Nostos,” Louise Glück says, “We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory.” The same, one could argue, is true of poem-making. We experience the poetic occasion, the thing that incites the poem, once, and then remake it in a poem, in subsequent revisions, and, often, across numerous poems. Many of the poems in *Ways to Beg* retread narrative events, separated by time or perspective. Write the same poem twice, in which the two poems share no more than ten words.
- Try that again. Take any poem you have and flip it (summer to winter, death to life, first to third-person POV, etc.), whatever that means to you relative to the poem.
- Write a poem in which your goal is to make the audience laugh.
- Write a long poem (at least three pages) with no punctuation or stanza breaks. Notice the language that allows you to pivot from moment to moment, idea to idea. Notice the places where you get stuck and the ways in which you get unstuck. What does this teach you about the ways a poem moves?
- Write a poem to someone or something that can’t respond. For examples, see “Monologue, with Dog,” “Someday, You Too Will Be on Hold with the Insurance Company,” or “Stages.” How do your goals change when you are speaking directly to someone or something that can’t respond, that may never hear you?
- Write a poem back to yourself in the voice of that someone or something that can’t respond. How does imitation affect the writing process? What changes when you are the sole recipient of a poem?
- Make a list of things you’re ashamed of. Write a poem about one of them—condemn, explain, and/or forgive yourself.

Discussion Questions (book as a whole)

- *Ways to Beg* begins by imagining the creation of the universe and ends by ruminating on Earth's ongoing destruction. What other narrative arcs are apparent in this book? Where do those arcs overlap?
- There are many dichotomies in *Ways to Beg*, down to its very structure. What poetic, thematic, and stylistic differences distinguish Section I from Section II? Does one section inform the other? Which poems seem to exist in conversation?
- How does the speaker use humor throughout the collection? How does this impact how you feel about the speaker and the subject matter? Cite examples.
- The speaker uses a lot of religious imagery, though often seems suspicious of religion itself. How do you reconcile the two? What does this say about how the speaker regards religion or belief in general?
- What does the speaker of *Ways to Beg* seem to want? How do the desires discussed in individual poems inform the title of the book? Vice versa?
- *Ways to Beg* is split between poems with traditional punctuation and those with none. What do the poems with no punctuation have in common? Why do you think the writer chose one style versus the other?
- Identify recurring topics, themes, words, and characters in *Ways to Beg*. What do you think the writer intends to accomplish with this repetition? Do you feel that you come to know anyone besides the speaker?
- Identify references to the seasons throughout *Ways to Beg*. When and why are they invoked?
- The first section of *Ways to Beg* begins with the following epigraph from Tony Hoagland: "As the gods in olden stories // turned mortals into laurel trees and crows / to teach them some kind of lesson, //so we were turned into Americans / to learn something about loneliness." How is America portrayed in this collection? How does the speaker engage with loneliness? Where does the speaker see hope? What poems point to the possibility of redemption and connection?
- The second section of *Ways to Beg* centers on grief. How does the speaker navigate the grieving process? What stereotypes are undone? Which ones are validated?

Discussion Questions (individual poems)

Section I

- In what ways do “Arrival” and “Abracadabra” welcome the reader into the world of the collection? What is the function of the direct addresses?
- Storytelling permeates *Ways to Beg*. What craft elements typically associated with prose are used in “104.7 FM, the Zoo,” “After Driving Behind a Truck with a ‘Redneck Romeo’ Bumper Sticker,” and “Distractions”?
- “Lucy’s” and “H(om)e” both explore the speaker’s relationship with home and the various ways it pushes and pulls. What metaphors are employed in each poem and how do they reflect the speaker’s conceptions of home?
- The three poems that take their titles from Donald Trump quotes all have very specific shapes and forms. What is the effect of these forms? How does the breathless quality reflect the subject matter?
- “Pathology of Violence,” “Post-Racial,” “Baptism,” and “Flight” all revolve around some sort of guilt or shame. What linguistic patterns emerge in these poems? What coping mechanisms? How does the speaker use language itself to try to create distance between himself and the poetic occasion?
- “Nocturne Interrupted,” “Nightmare on Elm Street,” “Apartment B,” “Suicide,” and “Loneliness” are ruminations on loneliness, the inability of the subjects and the speaker to understand or to be understood. Where does language fail in these poems? Where can it go no further? What subjects or semantic structures seem to precede these failures?

Section II

- “Diptych” and “Seasons” foreshadow the death of the speaker’s mother, but in very different ways. “Diptych” relies on metaphor and form, while “Seasons” is largely void of each. What might account for this change from poem to poem? What new details emerge from a narrative perspective? What do your conclusions suggest about the relationship between subject matter, tone, and craft?
- “It Took Seven Days for My Mother to Die” is a long poem. How does it justify its length (or doesn’t it)?

- Identify the five stages of grief in “Stages,” “My Mother Prepares Me for Her Death,” “Family,” and “Loss.” Does the speaker subvert any expectations regarding the grieving process?
- Until “Foreshadow” and “A Lesson in Annihilation,” Section II progresses linearly from poem to poem. What might account for this abrupt detour into childhood? How does the narrative arc give way to the thematic arc?
- How is beauty portrayed in “Asylum Pastoral”? How does that portrayal reflect the speaker’s grief?
- “Audience,” “Winter,” “Monologue, With Dog,” and “Kayaking, Early Morning” all orbit a central theme of loneliness. What are the circumstances that arise in each poem that conjure feelings of loneliness? Does the speaker’s reaction to those circumstances surprise you or subvert expectations? If so, what might be the point of that surprise, that subversion?
- What are the sources of wisdom in “Found Mantra in the Frozen Food Aisle” and “Someday, You Too Will Be on Hold with the Insurance Company”? How does the speaker try to apply this wisdom?
- There is a sort of summary and conclusion threaded through “Revelation,” “Psalm I,” and “Communion.” What narrative and thematic arcs are refrained? How has the speaker’s feelings towards them evolved over the course of the collection? How do you think the speaker’s feelings about these things will continue to evolve? What is the speaker’s trajectory?

Discussion Questions (personal connections)

- How does your religion (or the religion of your parents, community, or country) shape your worldview? How does it help you or hinder you? If it is entirely absent from your life, do you mourn, celebrate, or, perhaps, never even think about its absence?
- *Ways to Beg* orbits the speaker's home. He interrogates it, laughs at it, remembers it, returns to it. What is your relationship with your home? Are you moving towards or away from it? Why?
- How does the speaker in *Ways to Beg* regard the idea of America versus the reality of America? How do you? In what ways has America disappointed, surprised, or comforted you?
- *Ways to Beg* worries about ethics: what is right? What is wrong? How do we forgive ourselves? Do we deserve forgiveness? What must we do to become better, kinder? Most of the poems are unable or unwilling to answer those questions. How do you go about trying to answer them in your own life? What works for you? What doesn't?
- How does the speaker in *Ways to Beg* try to connect with others? What impediments arise? How do you try to connect with others? What impediments arise?
- What is the function of loneliness in *Ways to Beg*? What is its function in your life?
- Much of Section II revolves around grief. What seems to be the speaker's grieving process? Historically, how have you coped with your grief? Do you try to exert control over it? Or let it guide you?
- The speaker in *Ways to Beg* tends to find comfort and wisdom in strange places: a toddler throwing a fit in the grocery store, a dilapidated sanitarium, a dead bird. Where do you find comfort? Wisdom? How do you hold onto it? How do you remember it?

Classroom Activities: Call and Response

This activity is meant to implicate students as participants in the meaning-making of a poem, and, more importantly, to encourage them to acknowledge *themselves* as meaning-makers. Divide students into small groups and assign or have them choose one (or more) of the following poems:

- Arrival
- Abracadabra
- After Driving Behind a Truck with a “Redneck Romeo” Bumper Sticker
- Pathology of Violence
- Post-Racial
- Nocturne Interrupted
- Psalm I

Each of these poems pose real, non-rhetorical questions to the reader. Ask students to consider, discuss, and take notes on the following:

- How would you answer the question posed in the poem?
- How do others in your group answer the question?
- How does your understanding of the question or your personal experience impact your various responses?
- How do you think the speaker would answer the question?
- Why doesn’t the speaker answer it?

Have each group read their poem(s) aloud and then present their findings.

Classroom Activities: Rhythm and Shape

This activity is meant to encourage students to examine the rhythm and shape of a poem. Have students re-write/reorganize one of the following poems in such a way that it looks entirely different on the page:

- Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States
- Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!
- Pathology of Violence
- Baptism
- Diptych
- Stages
- Family
- Loss
- Audience
- Winter
- Found Mantra in the Frozen Food Aisle
- Psalm I

Students should feel free to re-write to meet their needs, but their focus should be on re-imagining shape—altering line/stanza breaks and amending punctuation to say the same thing in a new way. Ask students to consider and take notes on the following:

- What is the poem trying to say?
- How does the new shape reflect what the poem is trying to say?
- How do your changes alter the rhythm and pace of the poem?
- How do you decide where to break a line or stanza?
- Choose a few line/stanza breaks and explain how they benefit the poem. If you reorganized the poem into a prose poem, explain why.

Classroom Activities: Call and Response II

This activity is meant to encourage students to locate and explore narrative and thematic arcs. Divide students into small groups and ask them to identify two poems that seem to exist in conversation. To avoid the more obvious analysis among clustered poems, specify that the poems they select must be at least 15 pages apart from one another.

Ask students to consider and take notes on the following:

- What ties the two poems together?
- How does the speaker's attitude change or remain the same regarding the narrative or thematic occasion? What might account for this?
- What craft elements change or remain the same? What might account for this?
- Simplify each poem down to a sentence. Compare the two. What is each poem trying to say? What is each poem trying to say to or about the other?

Have each group read their poem(s) aloud and then present their findings.

Classroom Activities: Q&A

This activity is meant to encourage students to think like a writer. Ask students to write down five questions they have for the writer regarding specific craft elements in a specific poem. Next, divide the class into pairs and have them swap questions. Each student will then study the poem their partner focused on and will answer their partner's questions as the author.

Ask students to consider the following:

- To the best of your ability, try to answer the questions from the author's point of view.
- Treat this as a writing exercise—notice the ways in which you imitate the author. What comes easy? What doesn't?

After they have answered their partner's questions, have the pairs return their Q&As and discuss their findings. Facilitate a conversation with the whole class unpacking any intriguing discoveries.

Sample Assignments

Craft: Close Reading & Analysis

In this paper, students will examine the machinery of one poem in *Ways to Beg*. How do all the parts of the poem contribute to the whole? This paper should be preceded by conversations about poetic craft elements.

Poetic Echoes

In this paper, students will examine and track a narrative or thematic arc that is threaded throughout *Ways to Beg*. This paper should be preceded by conversations about narrative and thematic arc, and, for creative writing courses, conversations about organizing a collection. Other collections in which poetic echoes are fundamental: Ross Gay's *Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude*, Marie Howe's *What the Living Do*, Dorianne Laux's *The Book of Men*, Louise Glück's *Wild Iris*, and Adrian Matejka's *The Big Smoke*.

Poetic Pivots: Tone Analysis Through Song

In this paper, students will create soundtracks for a poem to examine how it moves tonally from moment to moment and to identify the craft elements that facilitate these turns. This paper should be preceded by conversations about tone and arc and plenty of practice close-reading poems. You can also set up a Spotify playlist so that students can share their soundtracks.

[sample student assignment sheets below]

Course XXXX: Course Title XXXX

Craft: Close Reading & Analysis

The Assignment

As you know, our understanding of a poem is shaped, not just by what the poem says, but how it says it. Pick a poem from *Ways to Beg* and identify how it engages the following craft elements:

- Metaphor
- Rhythm and Meter
- Form and Structure
- Voice
- Imagery
- Syntax
- Sound

In a four-page paper, explore the following:

- What is the poem trying to say?
- How does the treatment of each craft element contribute (or even subvert!) the poem's message?
- How do these craft elements work in tandem with each other?
- What elements are given more attention than others and why?

Note: This paper should be double-spaced in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. Please ensure your margins are set to 1 inch.

Grading Criteria

Your paper will be graded for the extent to which it:

- Provides meaningful, thoughtful, and original analysis
- Adds to our understanding of the poem
- Fully develops and defends its claims
- Is effectively organized and structured
- Adheres to the guidelines above, as well as MLA formatting

Course XXXX: Course Title XXXX

Poetic Echoes

The Assignment

A collection of poems, like a novel, tells a story by traversing any numbers of arcs. These arcs can be narrative: what happens to the subjects? What do they learn? And they can be thematic: what is the speaker's attitude towards a given subject? How does that attitude evolve/devolve? In *Ways to Beg*, some of these arcs are obvious (the speaker's mother dies, and her death is proceeded by commentary on grief), but many are more nuanced (the speaker's tone regarding loneliness subtly shifts over the course of the book).

In a seven-page paper, select a narrative or thematic arc and trace it through the book, exploring the following:

- Where does the arc begin? Where does it end?
- What poems engage this arc?
- What changes from poem to poem? What might account for these changes?
- How do craft elements reflect the moment they represent on the arc?
- How do these moments speak to and of each other?
- What effect do poetic echoes have on the reading experience?

Note: This paper should be double-spaced in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. Please ensure your margins are set to 1 inch.

Grading Criteria

Your paper will be graded for the extent to which it:

- Provides meaningful, thoughtful, and original analysis
- Adds to our understanding of the collection
- Fully develops and defends its claims
- Is effectively organized and structured
- Adheres to the guidelines above, as well as MLA formatting

Course XXXX: Course Title XXXX

Poetic Pivots: Tonal Arc & Song

The Assignment

Within a poem, typically, there are *other* poems. Really, a poem is a collection of poems: each stanza a poem, each line a poem, each word a poem. To understand how a poem moves from moment to moment is to identify and examine these meta-poems.

To this end, in a five-page paper, take one poem from *Ways to Beg* and create a soundtrack mapping its poetic pivots. These songs should attempt to capture and map the tonal arc and subtext, not simply reflect the subject matter. Consider the following:

- Where do tones shift?
- What craft elements facilitate and precede these turns?
- What is the purpose of these turns? What is their impact on the poem as a whole?
- How do the shifting sounds of poem inform your soundtrack?

Note: This paper should be double-spaced in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. Please ensure your margins are set to 1 inch.

Grading Criteria

Your paper will be graded for the extent to which it:

- Provides meaningful, thoughtful, and original analysis
- Adds to our understanding of the poem
- Fully develops and defends its claims
- Is effectively organized and structured
- Adheres to the guidelines above, as well as MLA formatting