

Researching a Way into a Poem – with Poetry Prompts!

by Jeannine Atkins

Both poets and scientists may look closely at the world, make mistakes, try again, and wonder. As I read and wrote about scientists, I tried to understand the core of their work and why they loved it. In *Finding Wonders: Three Girls Who Changed Science*, I meant to show what makes someone extraordinary, but also what we all have in common. Here I've set down some of the stages of composing poems, though I'll remind you that stages may blend, sometimes all within the same minute or so.

Choose a subject

Walking outdoors, then writing down some of what you see, hear, or smell can start a poem. Writing about history can also begin the same casual way. I like to write about people I admire and want to know more about. Often I choose people with information missing. To me, that's an invitation to imagine. I read and jot down images that suggest stories, usually things that draw on the five senses. It's good to be relaxed as on a walk in which we might discover nothing, but enjoy ourselves, though maybe we get a little bored. Who knows what's around the bend!

Research

After the spark of curiosity, research begins. I learn all I can about the subjects from biographies, diaries, or letters, and also read about when and where someone lived and the nature of her work. I aim to keep to the facts of what is known about someone and take notes on dates as well as bits of information that may have little to do with big discoveries or events, but add to texture. Some of the sorts of questions I have beyond what made someone famous are:

- Did she have a dog or ride horses?
- What did she wear?
- What did she eat for breakfast?
- What might have been on a table by her bed?
- Did she have a best friend?
- Who in her family might have been most important to her?

Inference and Imagining

As I read, I pause to daydream. Using a framework of facts, I let myself imagine a way into the holes in history. Sometimes I start with what's known and use inference and more research to expand. For instance, I learned that Maria Merian's uncle worked in a silk mill and that she studied and drew silkworms, cocoons and moths. I watched short videos showing some transformations and I read about old silk mills and inferred some of what Maria might have seen. Then I used my imagination to create a scene with Maria and her uncle.

I knew Mary Anning found fossils and took them from the shore in England, but there's no record of exactly how she did this. I could infer, or feel pretty sure about, the sorts of tools and techniques she used by reading about other fossil hunters who worked when she did. I knew her father died when she was about ten, but there's no record of her response. Considering the respect Mary showed to her father's work, and my own feelings about my father's death, under very different circumstances, I imagined her response.

Facts and imagination are distinct, but blend in the finished poem. Many drafts of poems send me back to more research, inference, and compassion: How is this person so different from me also like me?

Poetry Prompts

I spend months reading, daydreaming, taking wrong paths, cutting some poems that sprawled into others, borrowing images from one to reflect in another, and eventually setting things right. But in a writing workshop or classroom no one has that kind of time. So here are some ways to write from research that may work within a single sitting.

Starting with A Few Good Words

Small details are so important, and may fit in one good word. I'm particularly fond of concrete nouns that give images we can see or touch. William Carlos Williams, who wrote small poems about red wheelbarrows in the rain, wrote, "No ideas but in things." It can be fun for students to share words that call up one of the five senses, putting the words on a board for all to share, or swapping words on index cards. Sometimes a challenge can be made to use three or five words. Another challenge can be to check to see if at least three of the five senses have been called up.

Poems Starting with a Portrait or Photograph

Everyone in the class or group might write about the same period in history or even the same person. Some might research different aspects of one person.

Everyone can look at the same picture of a person and make guesses about what she or he was like just from that photo. Then a few facts from research can be woven into this.

You might write this as a letter, perhaps keeping some of the questions.

Shuffling the Common and Grand

One way to write a poem is called the Cut-and-Shuffle. It's always hard to trace who originated a prompt, but I believe this one began with poet Jack Myers. In *The Practice of Poetry*, edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twitchell, his way begins by writing one quiet scene, then another that is active, then alternating lines from one scene to the other.

To adapt this for using historical research, I suggest first choosing a subject and deciding whether the subject will be a child or adult. Write notes about this person doing something ordinary in her time and place such as: planting corn, going to grocery store, riding the bus, making a kite, drawing flowers, baking a cake.

Then show her involved in work that changed the way others saw the world. In both cases, try to write concisely and vividly. Maybe this looks like two poems. Great! But can you combine lines from each to make a new poem?