

Pantoums

One pattern that yields successful poems is a version of the less-familiar pantoum, a poem consisting of eight non-rhyming lines each are used twice. A pantoum is less intimidating for reluctant poets and works well because it is based more on repetition than on rhyme or rhythm patterns. It also can be used as an alternative book report to capture key events, a memorable scene, or a favorite character from a literary work or from a life experience. You may have noticed a student sample in the chapter about the 20th century novel. Here is a sample poem written when a seventh grade class finished reading, *A Farewell to Manzanar* by John Houston and Jeanne Watasuki Houston, an autobiographical novel about Japanese internment during World War II.

Begin by writing four original lines:

- (1) When I was seven
- (2) My family was evacuated.
- (3) We rode a bus
- (4) To Manzanar.

Repeat lines two and four, and add lines five and six to expand ideas introduced in lines two and four, like this:

- (2) My family was evacuated.
- (5) Only forty-eight hours to prepare, then
- (4) To Manzanar.
- (6) We rode in shock, but together

Repeat lines five and six, and add lines seven and eight to expand ideas mentioned in lines five and six, like this:

- (5) Only forty-eight hours to prepare.
- (7) Mama, stressed and frustrated, broke all the dishes.
- (6) We rode in shock, but together.
- (8) Together, except for Papa.

Finally, repeat lines one, three, seven and eight in this order:

- (7) Mama, stressed and frustrated, broke all the dishes.

(3) We rode a bus

(8) Together, except for Papa.

(1) When I was seven.

The final poem, then, reads

When I was seven

My family was evacuated.

We rode a bus

To Manzanar.

My family was evacuated.

Only forty-eight hours to prepare, then

To Manzanar.

We rode in shock, but together.

Only forty-eight hours to prepare, then

Mama, stressed and frustrated, broke all the dishes.

We rode in shock, but together.

Together, except for Papa.

Mama, stressed and frustrated, broke all the dishes.

We rode a bus

Together, except for Papa.

When I was seven.

The result is an interesting poem that captures the essence of the work of literature. If you try this pattern yourself and you can see how much grammar students must review to make sure pronouns are the right number and gender and that the verbs are the right tense to make sense as they add more lines!