



IOWA ARTS COUNCIL

POET LAUREATE IN THE CLASSROOM

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(515) 242-6194

[jennie.knoebel@iowa.gov](mailto:jennie.knoebel@iowa.gov)

Lesson 1: Sensory Detail

# SO MUCH DEPENDS UPON

poetry prompts for all ages

**Debra Marquart, Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts & Sciences**

Iowa State University

Iowa Poet Laureate

# WHAT MAKES VIVID WRITING?

❖ Good writing is driven by sensory detail.

❖ What are the five senses?

- Sight
- Smell
- Taste
- Touch
- Sound

❖ In this poetry exercise we will read and analyze a vivid poem then try our hand at writing a poem.

## The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

-William Carlos Williams

LET'S GET STARTED: See the way this poet paints a vivid picture of a moment with only sixteen words? He relies mostly on visual detail (sight) but "glazed with rain water" also starts to give us texture (touch).

YOUR TURN: WHAT SOUNDS AND SMELLS CAN YOU ADD?

# JAMES WRIGHT

Lying in a Hammock at William  
Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,  
Asleep on the black trunk,  
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.  
Down the ravine behind the empty house,  
The cowbells follow one another  
Into the distances of the afternoon.  
To my right,  
In a field of sunlight between two pines,  
The droppings of last year's horses  
Blaze up into golden stones.  
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.  
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.  
I have wasted my life.



LET'S GET STARTED: On a piece of paper, list the words or phrases from the above poem that draw on sight, smell, taste, touch, sound. What does each one tell you about what the poet wants you to know about this moment? Imagine yourself lying in the hammock. How do the details make you feel? Finally, did the last line surprise you? What do you think it means?

# YOUR TURN: A FAVORITE MEMORY

In addition to stories we tell often, we are all storehouses of significant memories that we have not tried, or not tried often, to voice. These may be fragments more than stories—the way you felt climbing the steep back stairs at your grandparents' house when you were small, the roommate you had for only three days in your first year at college. Leaf through your memories. Find one that is attractive to you, for reasons you do not need to understand. Write it out as precisely as you can. Give it an ending if it lacks one, or explore your feelings about what it means to you. Ask yourself why it would be interesting to someone else, and make it mean something to your reader.

Beth Baruch Joselow, *Writing Without the Muse: 60 Beginning Exercises for the Creative Writer*

# HOW TO FREEWRITE

- For ten minutes, on a clean sheet of paper, jot down your impressions of your favorite memory. Draw the location of the memory for your reader—where you are, what time of day, who is with you, what are you wearing, what are the sounds/silences around you?
- Are there smells or tastes associated with this memory. What is the light like—dark, bright? Is something happening—an event, such as a meal or a wedding?
- As you freewrite, concentrate on keeping your pen moving. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar. Just keep putting down sensory details. If your mind goes to another story, follow it. Don't worry about staying with your original memory.

**REMEMBER TO SHARE:** After you finish your freewrite, read your favorite memory to someone near you and discuss all the sensory details you included.

# DEBRA MARQUART



Debra Marquart is a Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Iowa State University and Iowa's Poet Laureate. She is the Senior Editor of *Flyway: Journal of Writing & Environment*. A memoirist, poet, and performing musician, Marquart is the author of six books including an environmental memoir of place, *The Horizontal World: Growing Up Wild in the Middle of Nowhere* and a collection of poems, *Small Buried Things: Poems*. Marquart's short story collection, *The Hunger Bone: Rock & Roll Stories* drew on her experiences as a former road musician. A singer/songwriter, she continues to perform solo and with her jazz-poetry performance project, The Bone People. Marquart's work has been featured on NPR and the BBC and has received over 50 grants and awards including an NEA Fellowship, a PEN USA Award, a *New York Times* Editors' Choice commendation, and *Elle Magazine's* Elle Lettres Award. She teaches in ISU's interdisciplinary MFA Program in Creative Writing and Environment and in the Stonecoast Low-Residency MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine. Her next book, *Gratitude with Dogs Under Stars: New & Collected Poems*, is forthcoming from New Rivers Press in 2021.

# CREDITS

William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow"  
from *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I, 1909-1939*, edited by Christopher MacGowan.

James Wright, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" from *Above the River: The Complete Poems and Selected Prose*.

Beth Baruch Joselow, "Favorite Memory" from *Writing Without the Muse: 60 Beginning Exercises for the Creative Writer*.

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