



This in-class activity was developed in conjunction with Lightbox interviews with [A. E. Stallings](#) and [Erica Dawson](#). For more information, please see www.lightboxpoetry.com.

Making Sense from Sound

In her interview, Erica Dawson writes about the importance of sound in her poetry: “Playing with sound like that keeps a poem on its toes. But, for me, it can’t only be about sound. You have to have something to listen to; but, you’ve got to have something to see and sense, and something to care about and follow.” In this activity, we’ll think about the relationship between a poem’s sounds and its meaning.

Part I

Take a look at these rich sound patterns from Erica Dawson’s poem, “One Fish, Two Fish”:

...They never swim
Or float, but hang as if translucent strings
Dangle from a puppet master’s hands, no swings
Or sways. The electric eel, like a ponytail
Just cut, falls round, loops big. His sliding scale
Bodes seizures, volts, charged minus, plus, the prey...

And later:

...The angler gapes.
One fish. Two fish. The filtered air reshapes
The fixed depiction. Three fish. Four. And still
Resumes. Red fish. Blue fish. A Rockcod’s gill
Yawns open...

Choose two or three words that have a sonic relationship—such as “gapes” and “reshapes” or “fish” and “filtered” and “fixed”—and think about what connects them. Focus on their sounds: do they rhyme? Use the same vowel sounds? Consonants? Then focus on other connections: To gape is to “reshape” the mouth; the “fish” itself is “fixed” in the “filtered” tank. What other connections can you come up with? Can you imagine how one word’s sound might have led Erica Dawson to a new image, idea, or metaphor?



Part II

With a partner or small group, come up with a random list of words—you might look through a book to help you. Choose some words that are fairly common—such as “house” or “tree” or “carrot”—and choose some words that are a little more interesting—like “hilarious,” “territory” or “translucent.”

Read one word to your partner or group, and have them respond with a word that has a sonic relationship with your word. For this part of the activity, let sound guide you. Maybe a rhyme springs to mind—like “parrot” for “carrot”—or maybe a word that uses the same consonants or vowel sounds—like “loud” for “house” or “train” for “tree.” See how many your group can come up with.

Part III

By yourself or as a group, choose two or three of your favorite pairs of sonically related words. What other, non-sonic relationships can you see between these words? Map out as many relationships as you can, just as you did with Erica Dawson’s poem. For instance: a parrot might eat a carrot; a parrot’s feathers might be bright orange like a carrot; a parrot molts and a carrot is peeled; and so forth.

Share some of the most interesting and unexpected relationships you’ve discovered between words that also share sounds.

Part IV

Sounds can be an important part of a poem, not just as an effect for the reader to delight in, but as a useful tool for the poet composing the poem, as well. Sometimes sticking closely with a pattern of sounds—such as a rhyme scheme—can suggest new meanings and relationships between words that can lead you, the poet, to a new understanding. Sounds can suggest new images, descriptions, metaphors, and similes, all the while giving energy to your poem.

Reflect on what you discovered about words with a sonic relation. Brainstorm some ideas about how a surprising or unexpected relationship between these words could be the basis for a new poem.