



This activity was developed in conjunction with Lightbox interviews with [Mary Jo Salter](#) and [Eduardo C. Corral](#). For more information, please see www.lightboxpoetry.com.

Controlling Metaphor

In her interview, Mary Jo Salter writes about controlling metaphor:

“You’re right that I often end up with some sort of controlling metaphor, at least in shorter lyrics, although I’m not sure this principle is limited to my autobiographical poems. But poetry’s controlling techniques do actually help us *discover* our feelings and work through them.

For me, stumbling upon a figure—a symbol, simile, metaphor—is very often what opens the door to writing a poem at all. In the case of “Bed of Letters,” I couldn’t have written the poem if I hadn’t started with the figure of sheets of paper being like bed sheets. The shared word “sheet” insists upon the likeness—which of course many other writers have noted. The poem took off when I saw that this likeness would help me write about two *writers* in bed, not merely two lovers.”

Re-read Salter’s poem “Bed of Letters,” and jot down some observations about how her connection between these two objects—the bed sheets and sheets of paper—lead her to new insights in the poem:



A **controlling metaphor** is a comparison between two things that a writer develops over the course of an entire poem. This is different than a traditional metaphor, which makes one specific comparison in a specific place, because the complexity and multi-facetedness of the comparison helps the poem develop new insights about its subjects. So, when you're choosing a controlling metaphor, you should look for two things that you believe have more than one level of figurative similarity.

For this exercise, we're going to ask you to interact with two objects and think about all the ways they relate to each other. These might be photographs, childhood toys, tools, or articles of clothing—any two objects that you think might have an interesting relationship to each other. After choosing two objects to work with, consider the following questions:

What are words that describe these objects? Make sure to use all of the senses.

Describe how we interact with these objects. Where do we find them?

Jot down some similar connotations we have between these two objects. Are there any other associated objects?

Are there any instances in which these two objects share language? Is there any way in which they do something similar?

When you're finished, share your results together as a class! Is there a seed of a poem in this comparison?