



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](http://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.