



This in-class activity was developed in conjunction with Lightbox interviews with [Jamaal May](#) and [David Yezzi](#). For more information, please see www.lightboxpoetry.com.

Performing the Page

In his Lightbox interview, Jamaal May writes, “All words are just cardboard cutouts standing in for what we really mean to say. Our only power is in arranging them in a way that implies the intangible truths that matter most.” In this in-class activity, we’ll consider how the conditions of the poem (especially its arrangement on the page) enact a kind of performance for us as readers.

Preparation

For this lesson, you’ll need a physical copy of Jamaal May’s *Hum* to share with the class, or copies of at least three of the poems from his –phobia sequence (printed on the grayscale pages in the book), such as “Athazagoraphobia: Fear of Being Ignored,” “Chionophobia: Fear of Snow,” and “Mechanophobia: Fear of Machines.”

Part I

Read Jamaal May’s “I Do Have a Seam” out loud as a class. Discuss some observations about how the poem exists on the page. What is unique about this poem? What makes it different from poems you’ve read before? Finally, what about the poem’s arrangement on the page suggests particular meanings to you, as a reader?

Part II

As a small group, read one or more of the following poems and consider how their visual arrangement on the page contributes to the poem’s meaning, to your sense of how the poem works. How does the poem perform itself on the page? You might share some observations to the whole class.

[Emily Dickinson, “Wild nights! – Wild Nights!”](#)

[Emily Dickinson, “Wild nights! – Wild Nights!” \(handwritten manuscript\)](#)

[Susan Howe, from “Hinge Picture”](#)

[Richard Wilbur, “Junk”](#)

Terrance Hayes, “Hide” (from *Lighthouse*)

[Todd Boss, “Should Leash Laws”](#)



Part III

As a class, reconvene and share the selection of –phobia poems from *Hum*. Now that you’ve thought about how the arrangement of words in an individual poem can shape its meaning, let’s think how the arrangement and conditions of the poems on the page throughout a book can create meanings within and across poems. Read the poems and consider how their physical presence affects how you read the poem. How does the gray shade behind each poem become part of a text’s performance? How do you read the changing shades throughout the book?

Part IV (Optional)

Think about a poet you love. While the physical arrangement of their poems on the page might be less dramatic than the examples provided here, the choices they make in arranging words on a page (in lines, in stanzas, in the open field of the book) contribute the text’s overall performance. Reflect on a few examples. You might even consider your own poems and how the choices you make shape the ways a reader would approach and appreciate your work.