

**Poetry and math: Making sense**

**HOSTS:**

*Ashleigh A. Allen &*

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**Workshop description:**

This 90-minute creative writing workshop unpacks the creative possibilities of reading and writing poems that explore the connection between numbers/ logic, and writing. Not just because it's Pi Day, but because so many of us in the world are trying to make sense of what is and has been happening for a long while. Notably the violence and wars. Part of this "sense-making" is the attempt to use logic, creating or implementing equations or situations (constructed and inherited) where we can "get a handle" on our understanding (temporary or permanent) and maybe even control (real and imagined) as part of our risk analysis. How do we make sense of things? How have we made sense? What do we hold on to, how do we measure this moment? Or ourselves in relation to it? As always, we look at a range of contemporary poets pushing against or harnessing these forms for their own purposes, to think about the possibilities they offer us for our own writing and thinking.

The purposes of this workshop are: to share in the reading of contemporary poetry, experience the act of writing poetry in community, and think about the possibilities for contemporary poetry in our lives and classrooms as writer educators. We aim to consider not only the content but also the sonic and structural choices poets make, as a way to consider the possibilities that a creative writing practice has to offer us as writers and educators.

We are grateful to be a part of a community that values engagement with writing and reading.

**Workshop outline:**

*(5 minutes)*

**Welcome participants & introductions / check-ins**

Names, pronouns, a word or two to describe how each person is feeling today

*(5 minutes)*

**Share the purpose of this workshop**

*(15 minutes)*

**Participants volunteer to read through all the poems at least once (Quaker style)**

**Poems & prompts:**

**Joel Dias-Porter, "Three wrong notes"**

- Name something that makes you feel “touched by god”
- List very random things that are round and unpack what you use them for/ your experience with these things (Dias-Porter mentions Pi, urinal cakes, a looped extension cord, egg yolks, an open mouth...)

### Naomi Shihab Nye, “Before I was a Gazan”

- Mention a memory of doing math at home as a child, what happened after you finished your homework?
- Include a list where you repeat the first word of a line three times (Nye uses “even”)

### TC Tolbert, “What space faith can occupy”

- Fill in the blanks: “When I say \_\_\_\_\_ I mean \_\_\_\_\_”
- Finish the line “I have seen the shape of...”

### Jari Bradley, “Unruly”

- Write a poem about a significant part of your identity that “they” (society, family, friends, institutions, etc.) tried to take out of/ subtract from you but failed.
- Consider your life (or an aspect of your life) up until now – what has been subtracted, added, multiplied, or divided to/ from it?

### Jane Hirshfield, “Ledger”

- Make your own ledger and include the details of a song, compare measurements and weights. Also, speak to the life and afterlife of things on your ledger (she uses potatoes → vodka) ...
- Finish the line: “What we care about most, we call...”

### McKenzie Toma, “Disintegrating calculus problem”

- Include the sentence structure “\_\_\_\_\_ instead of \_\_\_\_\_”
- Include a trophy in your poem (Who/ what/ where receives it? For what?)

### Lynne Thompson, “My Einsteinicity”

- Make a list of five words/possible topics and assign each of them an algebra letter. Perform various mathematical functions to these terms
- Combine a reference from Greek myth, the name of a plant or animal, and a style of dance in your writing

### George David Clark, “Kiss over zero”

- Make two lists of five items each and use these two lists to produce a set of metaphors (one item from one list IS one item from the other list). Use these metaphors in your writing
- Return to a memory or moment in which something has been removed or taken away

### Joan Bransfield Graham, “Nature knows its math”

- Make a list of three sets of rhyming words (eg: four/more, breeze/trees) to use in your writing
- Use mathematical terms to explain a natural phenomenon

**Nancy Botkin, “Geometry”**

- Describe a location using geometrical terms, or focus on the angles between objects
- Use the coordinates of something physical (above/below, diagonal) to describe an emotional terrain

**Anne Carson, “Stack poems” (from *Float*)**

- Make a list of five words that can mean multiple things (or a list of five homonyms), to use in your writing. You can define those various meanings, but you don’t have to
- Make a second poem by editing down or reducing your first poem – try to make the second poem half the length of the first one

**Souvankam Thammavongsa, “Theory of Writing”**

- Include several ways or methods of arriving at the same place/reaching the same conclusion
- Explore some reasons or impulses behind your desire to write

*(40-45 minutes)*

**Participants write**

Using the prompts offered above, participants mute their mics and write. Participants are encouraged to consider: What else do you see happening with language and imagery and topics/themes in these poems? Feel free to include or mimic other things you notice in these poems or anything else that inspires you today!

*(5 minutes)*

**Ideas for exit conversation. Participants invited to discuss and reflect on the experience:**

- What did you notice as you read and wrote? Were you surprised by anything in particular?
- Benefits/ uses of a workshop like this?
- Do you think you will incorporate any of these poems, themes of the poems, or this method of writing together in a virtual room in your own teaching? In what specific ways? If you would use these texts, you’d use them in conjunction with what other texts/ ideas/ questions?
- Are your students writing creatively together in virtual spaces? What does that look and feel like?