

# **DC Poets Workshop Handout**

## **Prepared for 6<sup>th</sup> grade standards**

**This handout is a sample similar to the one provided by Day Eight for use after a workshop by Day Eight's DC Poets in DC Classrooms program.**

Day Eight's DC Poets in DC Classrooms workshops use performance poetry to explore biography and personal narrative. The workshop leaders, all finalists or winners of the DC Poet Project poetry competition, perform excerpts of their original poetry, share personal stories, and encourage students to begin crafting their own biographies. The workshop also introduces the poetry and life of Essex Hemphill, a pioneering LGBT poet born and raised in the District. DC students find their own experiences reflected in the poetry and biographies of the workshop leaders, and through their modeling are encouraged to embrace personal expression in developing written work.

The handout provided to teachers for use post-workshop is prepared to align with the grade standards specific to each workshop. Handouts and workshop are available for grades 5-12. Each includes sample poems and exercises that reinforce grade-level reading standards.

Through the workshop and work-packet students will:

- Read closely to determine what text says and make inferences from it, and cite textual evidence in their explanations
- Determine central themes, and cite textual evidence in their explanations
- Interpret words and phrases as used in text
- Analyze how a particular sentence fits within overall structure and contributes to development of theme, plot, or story
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes style of a text
- Read and comprehend complex texts independently

Born and raised in Anacostia, poet John Johnson was the 2018 winner of the DC Poet Project, an open-to-all poetry competition designed to surface exceptional poets. His book of poetry, Love for Her, explores his experiences growing up in Washington, D.C., as well as his experiences as a father, and a black man. When he's not teaching or writing, John is also a theater director and actor.

Read the poem “DCPS” by John Johnson and answers the questions about the poem that follow.

## **DCPS (District of Columbia Public School System)**

By John Johnson

I had a history teacher that kept it real when I was in high school  
He said life is a big chess board  
They going to treat you like pawns and peons  
Colonized by Europeans  
Your black life matters  
You are a human beyond  
This world has strange customs  
And most people wear masks and costumes  
Outfits like Halloween

For example: the other day I was dressed up as a black man  
And got pulled over by a man dressed as a cop  
I knew immediately that I should have worn my white man in khaki outfit  
Because the interaction would have ended in him giving me candy corn instead  
of tension  
So I said, "Officer I know it's night and I am traveling home diagonally like a  
bishop to my castle.  
I am trying to do this without hassle I would like to make it to the eighth rank to  
my Queen  
I live 64 squares away right off of Martin Luther King."

But the officer was like many of you...  
He didn't know how to play chess  
Nor did he know how to turn the body camera on that was on his chest.  
He didn't have the same history teacher either

The same history teach that said,  
Life is a big chess board  
They going to treat you like pawns and peons  
Colonized by Europeans  
Your black life matters  
You are human beyond.

A. Paragraphs in poems are called “stanzas”. Looking at the poem “DCPS” by John Johnson, how many stanzas does the poem have?

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B. The poem is written from the perspective of the author, John Johnson, and he writes about relationships with two men. Who are the people he writes about? What are their jobs?

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_

C. One of the people he writes about is mentioned in the first stanza. Can you find where that person is first discussed? Copy the group of words (the phrase) that first mentions the first individual here:

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D. The second person he writes about is mentioned for the first time in the second stanza. Copy the phrase that first mentions the second individual here:

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E. The poem contrasts two experiences by the author. In the first experience the author is taught by a schoolteacher to respect himself, and in the second experience the author is made to feel un-important. Then in the last stanza the author repeats what his teacher taught him. Why do you think the repeats what his teacher told him?

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Octogenarian Susan Meehan was the 2017 winner of the DC Poet Project. In her book of poetry, Goddesses Incognito, Susan writes about raising children in Washington, D.C., and being a leader in her church.

Before she began publishing her poetry, Susan worked for forty years in the DC government, including twenty years for Mayor Marion Barry as a citywide patient advocate.

Read an excerpt of the poem “Goddesses Incognito” by Susan Meehan and answer the questions about the poem that follow.

## **Goddesses Incognito**

By Susan Meehan

Underneath  
The drab,  
The daily,  
We are passionate goddesses parading in  
Spangles  
Glinting jewels  
Shimmering cloth  
That mirror our enticing hips.

Underneath ragged watchcaps  
We are tender goddesses  
Crowned in  
Headwraps  
Tiaras  
Mantillas  
Bandanas  
That gracefully accentuate our nobility.

Underneath blowsy t-shirts  
Blazing ads in giant orange letters scrawled across our chests,  
We are opulent goddesses wrapped in a splendor of  
Plaids  
Kente  
Batik -  
All rich in colors of which males  
Don't even know the names,  
Much less the significance.

We are hidden where you expect us least.

A. Similar to the poem “DCPS” by John Johnson, “Goddesses Incognito” is a poem written from the perspective of the author. In this poem the author compares women to a mythical character. What type of character does she compare herself and all women to?

B. The poem “DCPS” describes the author being misunderstood by a character he encounters. In “Goddesses Incognito” the author also writes about being misunderstood. Who does the author write about being misunderstood by?

C. Can you find the phrase in the poem that describes the author being misunderstood? Write the phrase here.

D. The author writes about being hidden by something. By what does she describe herself being hidden? What category of item?

E. Write four words that you might use to describe the clothing you are wearing today:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

F. Write a sentence describing one time when you were misunderstood:

Born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, poet Kevin Wiggins was the 2019 winner of the DC Poet Project. His book of poetry, Port of Exit, explores his experiences as a gay black man. When he's not teaching or performing, Kevin is a delivery driver for FedEx.

Read the first two stanzas of “Chain of Infection” by Kevin Wiggins and answer the questions about the poem that follow.

## **Chain Of Infection**

By Kevin Wiggins

Now I want to know who told these boys to stop crying  
How many generations have we lost by teaching them to be men that they've got  
to tattoo their teardrops  
Release everything that's natural about your DNA and become inhumane to  
maintain your masculinity, to never open up,  
All the while being exposed to this toxicity

This is the chain of infection  
America has been the reservoir that's bore and nurtured this contaminated  
mindset that men shouldn't be allowed to feel  
Port of exit these ideals to a black man whose mode of transmission becomes  
violence because he now has to allow his hands to do the talking  
Damaging the port of entry and the psyche of the susceptible host with this toxic  
masculinity

A. In the first stanza of this poem, Kevin writes about being taught how to be a man, and mentions three things he thinks boys are told to do. What are those three things?

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B. In this poem the author compares toxic masculinity to a medical condition; what medical condition?

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Now read the third and fourth stanzas of “Chain of Infection” by Kevin Wiggins and answers the questions about the poem that follow.

Then you have someone like me whose sexuality will never make him man enough  
Who is openly attracted to masculinity so my masculinity can never be masked enough  
Because I am somehow a poor representation of a black man and his community

**Question**

Why are you so offended by me?  
When did I become your enemy?  
Would there be more inclusion for me if I had a woman to beat  
If I had a family to leave fatherless or was more condescending in my speak  
If I no longer wore my war wounds as rainbows would you then invite me to your table of brotherhood

A. In the third stanza of this poem the poet reveals he doesn't fit the masculine mold because he is attracted to men. He uses two phrases to describe that. Write one of those phrases here:

B. In the fourth stanza the poet asks the reader if we would think he was more of a man if he did one of these four things:

C. Have you ever offended someone? Write a sentence describing a time when you offended someone.

Read an excerpt from the poem “Criminally Black” by Kevin Wiggins and answer the questions about the poem that follow.

### An excerpt from: **Criminally Black**

By Kevin Wiggins

The land of the free ain't so free for a black man  
Concentration camps didn't begin in Germany  
They took their blueprint from a white America trying to cancel out this black  
album  
Without a reasonable doubt they now use our penal system  
Systematic injustices  
To implement our slavery  
As successors to our lineage we're all guilty as American gangsters  
And they have unfinished business with the dynasty  
Black People

America promises nothing  
40 acres and a mule and we've yet to receive nothing  
Has Medgar Evers and Rodney King taught us nothing?  
Emmett Till's murderers got away scot free  
Time served was absolutely nothing  
But yet Michael Vick does a two-year stint because in comparison to a pit  
Black life is worth  
Absolutely nothing

A. What do you identify as a central theme of this poem? Cite one phrase in your answer.

B. In your opinion, which word best describes how the poet feels about the history of injustice in the United States? Circle one.

Hope                    Fear                    Anger                    Amazement

B. Writing poetry is one way to process intense feelings. What are some other ways that you might process feelings? Name at least two.

Read 2017 DC Poet Project winner Susan Meehan's poem "Relinquishments" and answer the questions that follow.

## Relinquishments

By Susan Meehan

They say that if you struggle  
You live longer.  
But I see a gentle art  
In the gracious shedding  
Of ideas, manners, things  
That once were precious  
That once defined me in  
My glad high noon.

Now, I seek a soft equilibrium,  
For my life changes daily  
With new forfeits to be paid  
Each time I awaken.  
I try acting bravely  
With a shrug that has taken  
A lifetime to learn

Achieving counterbalance  
Is no minor art  
And so, as I relinquish the old high notes  
I can no longer reach  
The pirouettes my toes no longer twirl,  
I am amazed that what I had once thought  
Was so central, so beloved  
That I could not bear its loss  
Has been dismissed simply,  
Completely wiped out.

As I proceed through my striptease  
I struggle to retain an urbane smile  
Despite some tune-whistling lines  
New-etched around my lips,  
But still and yet I remain  
Quintessentially me  
For one more day  
And so I smile and say,  
Who could ask for more?

A. Can you identify a central theme, or themes, in this poem? Cite a phrase or phrases in your answer.

B. In the third stanza the poet compares losing her capacity as she ages to not being able to do several artistic feats. What are the two artistic feats she writes about? Write the phrases here.

C. In this poem the poet explores how her identity has shifted as she has aged. She writes about “ideas, manners, things” that once were precious to her, that once “defined” her. Write a sentence about who you are, naming one thing about yourself that you see as central to who you are.

D. Reading your own response to question “C” identifying one thing about yourself you see as central to who you are, do you think that as you get older that thing might change? Can you identify with the poet when she writes about letting go who she was when she was younger?

In the words of poet John Johnson: “you are human beyond”! Thank you for reading these poems by DC Poets and sharing your thoughts about them today.

To download a free PDF including poems by John Johnson, Kevin Wiggins, and Susan Meehan, visit [www.DayEight.org/workshops/DCPoetSampler.pdf](http://www.DayEight.org/workshops/DCPoetSampler.pdf)