



Essential Words: LTAB Online 2020

Lesson plans and writing prompts for teens



ASK ME, I'LL TELL YOU

by Catharine Batsios

DURATION: 1.5 hours

GRADE LEVEL: High School

WRITING LEVEL: Developing and
experienced writers

FOCUS: symbolism

KEY TERMS: symbolism, trope,
extended metaphor

EXAMPLE TEXT
[Ask What I've Been](#)
by Jamaal May

Check in | 15 minutes

Do you feel more like rock, glass, or bone today? Why?

Resource Building | 15 minutes

KEY TERMS

- **SYMBOLISM** is the use of images to express ideas, emotions, and states of mind.
- **TROPE**: a recurrent theme.
- **EXTENDED METAPHOR**: a comparison of two unlike things that continues throughout a paragraph or complete artistic work.

EXERCISE | **Make 3 lists.** Take 3 minutes to write each list:

- Name the sounds you hear in around your home.
- When someone asks about who you are or what you're like, what stories do you tell?
- If the streets in your neighborhood were people, what would they be like?

When you've finished your lists, assign rock, glass, or bone to represent some of the items on each list.

Close Reading | 20 minutes

Ask What I've Been by [Jamaal May](#)

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who or what is the main figure in this poem?
- Find at least one word or image that symbolizes each: bone, glass, rock
- Who is making the titular statement: *Ask what I've been*? Who is this poem for?
- Who or what is the poet discussing when they write about what they've been?



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Writing Prompt | 20 minutes

Write your version of an “Ask What I’ve Been” poem using one of or all of the tropes and extended metaphors we’ve discussed today: rock, glass, bone. If you don’t want to use rock, glass, or bone, choose your own trope or extended metaphor.

OR

Write a poem that begins with a question someone might ask about you. (Example: *When she asked me if never living in the same apartment for longer than two years made me feel cold, exposed, I just shrugged my shoulders and said...*)

Share Out | 15 minutes

Optional: Build a group poem off the cuff. OR Call & Response

First, give the students a minute or two to **identify their favorite images or phrases they’ve written today.**

Next, determine an order. The facilitator will offer **the call**, and the students will respond by **filling in the blanks** verbally using pieces of their own writing. Use the script below. Each line or blank can be a different student, and the rotation can continue indefinitely:

Ask what I’ve made, _____ **&** _____
from _____,

Ask what I’ve inherited, _____ **&** _____
from _____,

Ask what I am, _____ **&** _____
from _____.

Feel free to change or add to the script as needed. Be conscious of how soothing it may be to have a predictable rhythm in group poetry. This type of share out may also be an ideal closing ritual for future sessions.



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Ask What I've Been

by Jamaal May

I think gauze wound
around ankle, plaster poured
into a chest-shaped mold.
I think wet cement.
I say stone, and you think pebble
in stream or marble fountain or kimberlite.
I mourn being built from this. Made
of so much aggregate
and gravestone, so little
diamond and fountain water.
When I was a construction crane
my balled fists
toppled buildings of boys.
I rifled through the pockets
of their ruins.
Ask what I've been. Detroit
is a stretch of highway littered
with windshield,
a boy picking the remains

of a window from his hair.
I say Detroit;
you think glass.
I say glass; you think atrium;
I say atrium beams
warped by heat;
think cathedral. My shoe soles
say stain. Glass between treads,
treads imprinted on gum.
Everything finds its bottom,
say the sewers.
Don't come any closer,
begs a map of collapsed veins,
while the burnt-out colonial,
this empty lot,
and all this dark-alley cavity
all say the shelter is sparse, yes,
but there is space here for bones—
a ribcage, brimming like yours.

[Ask What I've Been, Blackbird](#)