

## Quaker Reading/Composition from Wesley Reid, Wooster High School

When Sheridan Blau presented this activity over a decade ago at a Nevada State Council of Teachers of English conference in Las Vegas, I think he called it text rendering or some similarly unfortunate name. Since then, I've changed the title, added some language, borrowed a few twists from other sources and discovered some effective ways to use this activity in a broader context. But the steps remain essentially the same as those Blau took us through.

Text: "My Name" from The House on Mango Street  
by Sandra Cisneros

Note: This activity can be used effectively with various poems or short prose pieces, best kept to a single page.

Time: 50 minutes, with follow-up the next day and beyond

Grade Level: With an appropriate text, I think Inside-Out is highly adaptable. I've used this activity successfully with seventh graders, high school juniors, college freshmen and adults.

Purpose: To find a different way into a text, to bump around inside that text for a while, to write a pathway back out.

Materials: Copies of the text for each participant

Preparation: Open minds and hearts and souls and a willingness to participate

What to do:

1. Turn the lights low or off. Create a different seating arrangement. Do something to change the atmosphere in the room.
2. Distribute text and ask students to read through it silently, highlighting or underlining up to three lines or phrases or bits of language that they like or that somehow stand out.
3. Read the text out loud, again asking students to note lines that speak or sing to them.
4. Depending on time and instinct and the mood of the group, read text out loud one or two more times. Or allow students to if they volunteer. Always note lines.
5. Jump-In Reading: Explain to the group that this time each paragraph (or line or stanza or sentence or other logical unit) will have a different reader. Reading is entirely voluntary. (This is usually not a problem, but it helps to be patient, as students will grow uncomfortable with prolonged silences and jump in.) It's probably best to identify the first reader; after that the reading proceeds randomly. If two people start to read a paragraph simultaneously, encourage them to both keep going. It's fun if everybody reads the last paragraph together, like some sacred text.

6. **Quaker Reading:** Now for the inside-out part. Ask students to look again at the lines they've noted or underlined and have them asterisk their top two or three. Tell them they are going to use those lines to rewrite the piece from the inside out, out loud and together. Here's how it works. As the spirit moves them (hence Quaker Reading), students will read or recite their line. Lines will fill the room, coming from all corners. Lines can be repeated, by the originator or someone else. Sometimes a certain line will act as a refrain. Again, be patient. Let the magic happen until it fades away.

Note: Many thanks to Liesel O'Hagan for using the term Quaker Reading during the NNWP Open 2004. It's the best description I've heard yet for this step.

7. **Conducting the Orchestra:** Toby Lurie does an activity in which he turns a row of people on a stage into a poetic orchestra. He gives each person a line and points at them, dramatic-conductor-style, when he wants them to recite/shout/sing/say their line. When I did the Inside-Out activity with a junior English class in April 2004, I spontaneously developed a variation on Toby Lurie. The class was sitting in a circle and I stood in the center. As the Quaker Reading step started to lose steam, I began pointing at students in turn and they read their very favorite line or phrase. I think this addition provides structure and closure and purpose following the Quaker Reading. You can write a poem out loud.

8. **Writing Prompt:** Students have two options. On the back, they can write down their favorite line and use it as a starting point for a poem or free write. See where it leads. Or, they can write what they know about their own name. The idea is to get them started in that language-rich atmosphere and ask them to develop a draft for the following day. Time permitting, you can have students share right away. Of course, there are many other options you might develop to suit the needs of your assignment and text.

**Extensions:** In terms of writing process, Inside-Out works well as an invention activity, helping students to get started, brainstorm, free write.

With the Cisneros vignette, the activity can be used as part of a larger unit on names and naming or as a way to get students started thinking about their own name.

While reading a larger text, provides an opportunity to focus on a particularly important or evocative excerpt of that text.

Models voice well (especially the Cisneros vignette) and allows students to play with voice in their own writing.

Immersion in the text can lead to richer idea development.

Close attention to language values word choice and sentence fluency.