

## Boundaries That Inspire: The Sestina

**Grade:** 5-12, perhaps younger students as well

**Length of time:** One 50 minute class period to introduce the sestina; another class period for the hard work of writing; perhaps yet another class period for sharing and revising.

**General goal of the lesson:** The sestina is a poetic form which places limits on word choice and stanza structure. The boundaries it imposes can provide security and comfort for the wary poet while inspiring playful line work that may spring surprises.

**Specific objectives:**

- Introduces the form of the sestina
- Introduces the poetic term “enjambment”
- Encourages using one word as more than one part of speech
- Encourages the poet to let words (instead of ideas) inspire lines
- Inspires non-sequential, dreamlike, compulsive narrative

**Resources:** Quite a few poetry anthologies contain examples of sestinas. Here are a few:

*Sleeping on the Wing* by Kenneth Koch

*The Discovery of Poetry* by Frances Mayes

*A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* edited by Annie Finch

*The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* edited by Mark Strand and Eavan Boland

**Summary of a sestina lesson:**

Part I: Choosing words

- Brainstorm homographs and homophones
- Discuss the great variety of ways these words can be used
- Ask students to select six words they like and write them in a column
- Draw a spiral through the words to demonstrate how the word order changes in a sestina
- Spiral out the word order for all six stanzas
- Explain the word order options for the seventh stanza (the envoy)

Part II: Writing the poem

- Read aloud some poets’ musings on the incantatory effect of the spiraling words
- Show the six-sided polygon which hints at the mystical quality of this form
- Encourage the practice of letting the words inspire the lines
- Explain the concept of “enjambment” and encourage its practice
- Write a sestina!