

VIDEO

Write With. . . Life Stories: Story Gathering with Joy Harjo

by 826 National and Life
Stories

GRADES 9–12

TYPE

MEMOIR
POETRY

Stories are the strands that connect us. In this lesson, you will connect with a friend or a family member, write about a memory you share, and maybe even learn something new!

WHAT YOUR STUDENTS WILL LEARN**About [Life Stories](#)**

Life Stories is a 501(c)(3) non-profit media organization that creates and distributes documentaries, interviews, and educational resources about people whose lives inspire meaningful change. These stories address issues of civics, history, politics, the arts and culture by shining the spotlight on relatable human stories of purpose and meaning in times of change. They provide open access to all our content for communities and classrooms through our curated website and YouTube channel.

About [The Thread](#)

The Thread is a documentary interview series exploring what it means to live a purpose-driven life through conversations with multi-faceted people who have helped shape our society. Each 30-minute episode takes viewers on a personal journey into the life of extraordinary people who candidly share their triumphs and failures. *The Thread* is available on the Life Stories website and YouTube channel, and as a podcast across all major platforms. Teaching *The Thread* brings the series into

the classroom with episode lessons designed to strengthen social emotional learning and media literacy skills and expand the scope of subject matter in Social Studies and English Language Arts.

WHAT YOU WILL DO

Editor’s Note: This lesson aligns with the following [CASEL Standards](#):

- Social Awareness
 - Taking others’ perspectives
- Relationship Skills
 - Communicating effectively
 - Developing positive relationships

Introduction

Joy Harjo, the first Native American chosen to be our nation’s Poet Laureate and the 2024 recipient of the Frost Medal for distinguished lifetime achievement in poetry, is a dream weaver. In this video, she describes growing up in Oklahoma and learning the stories from elders of the Muscogee traditions and tragedies. And in the tradition of all the great storytellers, she paints pictures for the mind’s eye to behold: “What are we without wings becoming words?” To see the full lesson created by Life Stories, please visit: [Joy Harjo: The Power of Poetry](#).

In this lesson, you will work together with a partner—a friend or a family member—to reconstruct the details of a memory the two of you have shared. Because every person remembers an experience differently, this activity acts as a beautiful moment of connection and understanding.

STEP 1

To begin, pull out your writing journal or a fresh piece of paper and freewrite your answer to this question: “What are stories and where do they come from?”

Set this aside to return to in a moment. Next, watch this clip of Joy Harjo’s *The Thread* interview: [24:19-end](#). After you finish watching the video, bring your freewrite page back. Now, reflect on these questions, based on what you heard from Joy Harjo:

- Where do stories come from—where can you find stories?
- What can other people’s stories teach you?
- How can you connect to someone else through their stories?

STEP 2

Next, choose either [“Becoming Seventy”](#) or [“Remember”](#), both by Joy Harjo, to read. Both poems are about the importance of stories and the details of memories. As you read, take note of the images, lines, and words or phrases that you personally connect with. Then, answer the questions that relevant to the poem you read in your writing journal:

“Becoming Seventy”

- This poem relies heavily on imagery and snippets of memories and stories. Which image(s) stick out to you the most and why?
- The event this poem centers on is the celebration of someone’s birthday, where friends have gathered. Can you identify more universal themes that are meaningful to you?
- This poem was written for Marilyn Kallet, a friend of Joy Harjo’s. It is written from Joy Harjo’s

perspective. Do you think a poem written by Marilyn Kallet, about similar topics, would share different details and ideas? If yes, why do you think that?

“Remember”

- This poem relies on imagery to share its core message. Which images and details stuck out to you the most?
- So much of “Remember” utilizes images of the natural world. Why do you think Joy Harjo chose to draw from nature for this poem?
- If you were to write your own “Remember” poem, what topics would you draw from—family, memories from when you were younger, etc.?

STEP 3

In Joy Harjo’s video, she talks about storytelling as an act of remembering people, places, and experiences. Both “Becoming Seventy” and “Remember” show the beauty of using poems as receptacles of memories. In these next steps, you will identify a friend or a family member that you would like to partner with to reconstruct a shared memory.

On page 1 of [Story Gathering with Joy Harjo — Handout](#), make a short list of friends or family that you share a lot of memories with, as well as the strongest memory you have with that person. When you’ve completed your list, circle the name of the person you’d like to continue this activity with and then ask that person if they’d like to help you out!

STEP 4

Next, you and your partner will create a short list of your favorite memories that you've shared together—from big life events, like birthday parties, to everyday moments, like playing basketball at the park. Reflect on your favorite memories and write 3-5 short summaries on page 2 of the handout. Choose one of the memories that you both like the best and place a star next to it. We suggest you do this in person, face-to-face, if you're able—a video call works if necessary.

Then, you will both write about the specific details of your chosen memory. Before you begin, take a look at page 3 of the handout together. This page models how detailed your answers to the questions should be to help you complete Step 5.

Next, make sure that both of you have a copy of page 4 of the handout. Take 5-7 minutes to independently answer the questions. After you've both completed the handout, reflect on this exercise together:

- Were any of the questions difficult to answer because you couldn't remember a detail clearly? Ask your partner to help you fill in the blanks.
- Which details do you remember that are the same, and which ones do you remember differently? Talk to each other about the details you remember differently and try to understand why you each remember them the way you do!

As you have this conversation, take notes on the new or updated details you learn about.

Editor's Note: Memories are easily reshaped over time, so we encourage you and your partner to stay curious about the ways you both remember an event.

STEP 5

Last, write a poem or a personal narrative about the shared experience, incorporating, if you wish, some of the new or updated pieces of information that your conversation highlighted. When writing, remember to use sensory language and dialogue to paint a vivid picture of the memory. Then, share what you wrote with your friend or family member. We encourage your partner to jump into this writing activity, too!

MATERIALS

- Joy Harjo: The Power of Poetry *The Thread* video
- [“Becoming Seventy” by Joy Harjo](#) OR [“Remember” by Joy Harjo](#)
 - 1 copy per student
- [Story Gathering with Joy Harjo — Handout](#)
 - Page 1, 1 copy per student
 - Pages 2-4, 2 copies per pair
- Writing journal or a blank piece of paper
- Writing utensil