

on the edge:
a memoir

by Alex Correa
with Terrence Hackett

Facilitator Guide

Compiled by Heidi Luebs Rees

Contents

Part I	Introduction	3
Part II	What's in this Guide	4
Part III	<i>Finding Meaning</i>	5
	Content Notes	5
	Norms for Discussion	7
Part IV	Facilitator Resources	8
	Suggested Scope and Sequence	9
	Silent Dialogue	10
	Marking the Text & Crafting Questions	12
	Reading Response Assessment	13
	Reader's Theater & Questioning the Character	14
	How to Generate Questions from Themes	15
	Found Poetry	16
	Qualities of an Effective Memoir	17
	Professional References and Works Cited	18

Part I Introduction

This guide outlines a suggested approach for discussing the tough themes in *on the edge: a memoir*. Whether *on the edge* is read independently, read aloud, or read in small or whole groups, the opportunity for student response and feedback is necessary. Suggested activities can be adapted. Questions are designed for group discussion, but can be used to establish meaningful correspondence with independent readers. *On the edge* can be read and discussed as a part of a genre study or theme study as well. You know your students best. To effectively create the conversation for change, you ultimately must decide how best to design instruction.

Why is student discussion of *on the edge: a memoir* important?

Alex Correa's story will understandably make students anxious and upset; if they are not given the forum to adequately discuss and respond to their emotions, the opposite of the intended effect will emerge. Without constructive guidance, Alex's suffering is trivialized and our view into his life is voyeuristic rather than empathetic. Alex's tragic childhood is due in large part to the absence of loving, thoughtful and reliable adults. In the face of unimaginable abuse, Alex becomes careless with his life. He sees no other alternative to his carelessness until he meets teacher Frank Tobin. Like Frank Tobin, we must help students construct meaning and see the possibility for change. Facilitating a structured discussion can help students answer their own questions about the brutality that Alex encounters and perpetrates and help them "find meaning for that suffering," (209).

What is the suggested organizational approach?

This guide is designed for reading *on the edge* in sections. Accompanying each section are opportunities for response. It is suggested that written responses be in the form of two-way dialogue journals (student/teacher, student/student). Written responses may be used as preparation for discussion or to reflect on the discussion. Responses may be assessed individually or as a group (see **Reading Response Assessment**). Corresponding section questions are not intended to be test questions; rather, they are suggestions to guide your planning. One or all of these activities may be used and additional activities may need to be designed to support your instructional needs. The reading culminates in a whole group discussion and extension activities. Refer to the **Suggested Scope and Sequence**.

Part II What's in this Guide

Part III *Finding Meaning*

Content Notes outline suggestions for facilitating a meaningful discussion with your students, including ideas to confront issues of sexuality and violence. **Page 5**

Norms for Discussion helps you establish expectations for participation prior to each discussion. **Page 7**

Part IV

Facilitator Resources are organized to help you differentiate your students' learning. Strategies address the three types of response to literature: personal, creative, and critical, (Raphael et al 2001). **Page 8**

Suggested Scope and Sequence is an organizational tool for the facilitator. It divides the novel into sections, pairing each section with facilitator strategies, student responses, resources and key questions. **Page 9**

Silent Dialogue occurs between pairs of students who carry on a conversation in writing surrounding a given quote, phrase, or word. It is a suggested pre-reading activity. **Page 10**

Marking the Text & Crafting Questions outlines two mini-lessons to teach students how to keep track of their thinking during reading and write effective discussion questions. **Page 12**

Reading Response Assessment is a tool for evaluating written response to literature. **Page 13**

Reader's Theater & Questioning the Character uses the text as a script. Students perform scenes from the novel to empathize with characters. **Page 14**

How to Generate Questions from Themes describes an activity to launch and find a focus for the final discussion. **Page 15**

Found Poetry allows students to choose important parts of the text and work collaboratively to reassemble phrases into free verse poetry. The found poems express culminating ideas about the text. **Page 16**

Qualities of an Effective Memoir describes a powerful activity to look at *on the edge* critically and launch the writing of student memoirs. **Page 17**

Professional References and Works Cited includes literature that further describes the theories and strategies presented in this guide. **Page 18**

Part III

Finding Meaning

The central purpose of this guide is to assist you in facilitating discussion so that you and your students can develop a community understanding of *on the edge: a memoir*.

Content Notes

How do I deal with issues of sexuality and violence in my classroom discussions?

Be vigilant in gauging students' reactions. In discussion or written response, some students will openly reveal that they are having a difficult time. Some signs of stress will be subtler. Talk to your school counselor for advice.

Establishing student expectations prior to each meeting will strengthen the integrity of the conversation (see **Norms for Discussion**). Insist that any language and anecdotes from the text be used constructively, that is, used as evidence to support an assertion. It is essential to continually refocus the discussion so students dig deeper into a theme rather than use the text to get a laugh. Kids naturally seek approval from their peers. In fact, your students' families may very well share some of the characters' dehumanizing assumptions about women, homosexuality and violence. However while students must be allowed to express their thoughts freely, it is important to let them know what is and is not appropriate.

Regardless of their beliefs, it is never appropriate for students to make dehumanizing statements about individuals or groups of individuals. Sexuality is the last domain where intolerance is socially acceptable and it is our duty as educators to reverse the status quo by promoting the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, notably Article 1:

*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act
towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*

For instance, it is well within the realm of the imagination that in discussing the pedophile Tom, students may react inappropriately to homosexuality. The students' feelings about homosexuality are irrelevant and in fact, Tom's actions are child abuse. His *abuse* is what strips dignity from himself and from those he harms. Similarities between student reaction and Alex's father's reaction could be revealed through questioning -- Why does Alex include Tom in his memoir? Why is Alex's father so angry? Why does Alex run away after this event?

More than likely, your students have been victims, witnesses, or perpetrators of violence. Discussing violence through the lens of Alex's father is painful, but confronting Alex's violent behavior is complex. It can not be explained simply as a consequence of his father's violence. It is probable that his father's violence caused him to seek the acceptance of violent peers. His unexpressed rage manifested itself into risk-taking such as invading people's homes and escalating to taking a human life. Peer pressure was self-imposed.

Although the intent of Alex's violent behavior may have been to get money for food and drugs and to impress his peers, the outcome went beyond his needs; violence causes irreversible terror and trauma. No matter Alex's grim environment, this memoir is not intended as an excuse. Alex made the decision to be violent, and it is up to you and your students to grapple with the reasons why.

Ultimately, this is hopeful. Our community can work toward preventative measures to help students cope with despair and reroute risk-taking behaviors toward constructive choices. Discussion of *on the edge* is part of this prevention and part of Alex's purpose in telling his story.

Frank Tobin echoes Article 1 of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in his assertion that we are all humans capable of love and being loved and that gives us value and worth, (207). To accept this is to embrace diversity and forgiveness. In many ways, the practice of effective facilitation is what we hope is the enduring understanding of *on the edge*.

How do I facilitate a meaningful discussion?

- Review Norms for Discussion with your students.
- Launch Discussion: For section discussions, students may write questions prior to the discussion (see **Crafting Questions**). For the final discussion, ask each student to think of one word that encapsulates Alex's story. Help students to turn words into themes, group the themes and generate questions (see **How to Generate Questions from Themes**).
- Students and the text should drive the discussion. Focus on the most relevant and pervasive question/theme.
- Sustain the conversation through redirection to the text and theme.
- Ask students to reflect: How did the discussion go for you? Do you have any unanswered questions?

Norms for Discussion

What is it? Setting expectations for participation prior to each discussion

Resources: All members of discussion group

Student

Responses: Discussion; chart of Norms for Discussion for reference

Getting Started

- With the whole group, brainstorm ways to make discussion meaningful.
- Record responses on chart paper.
- Post the chart so it is accessible.
- Review norms prior to each discussion.

Establishing expectations prior to discussion is key for its success. Discussing within a framework upon which all participants agree encourages depth. Students should be able to generate the list with guidance. This may also be a good time to introduce students to Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Examples of Norms for Discussion

- Be prepared, having generated questions and read carefully and completely. Bring your marked book to discussion.
- Refer to the text to support your ideas.
- Keep an open mind.
- Build on each other's ideas. Ask questions.
- Talk to each other, not only to the facilitator.
- Be polite: make eye contact and do not interrupt.
- Value each other's opinion, but do not be afraid to disagree constructively.
- Stay focussed.

Part IV Facilitator Resources

Suggested Scope and Sequence	9
Silent Dialogue	10
Marking the Text & Crafting Questions	12
Reading Response Assessment	13
Reader's Theater & Questioning the Character	14
How to Generate Questions from Themes	15
Found Poetry	16
Qualities of an Effective Memoir	17
Professional References and Works Cited	18

Suggested Scope and Sequence

Reading Selection	Facilitator Strategies & Student Responses	Resources & Key Questions
Pre-Reading	Silent Dialogue Discussion	Silent Dialogue: Reverse the Theme & Define the Character
13-30	Read Aloud Mini-lesson: Marking the Text & Crafting Questions	Marking the Text & Crafting Questions What does Alex think about the man he killed? Why does Alex turn himself in?
30-113	Written Response Discussion	Reading Response Assessment Why are some sections in italics? Why does the author include incidents from Happy Valley Farm? Characterize Alex's father; what is the motivation behind the beatings? What is the significance of Ramon in Alex's life? Why is Alex's father so angry about the incident with Tom? Why does Alex decide to leave? What leads to Alex's drinking and drug use?
113-147	Written Response Discussion	Reading Response Assessment What does it mean to survive? How are women valued? Does Alex prefer life on the streets? Compare/ contrast Ron and Alex's father.
148-196	Written Response Discussion	Reading Response Assessment Is violence a part of survival? What is the appeal of becoming a "stone-cold gangster"? Describe Alex's reaction to his father's news.
198-214	Reader's Theater Questioning the Character	Reader's Theater & Questioning the Character Reflect on your experience portraying a character/watching the portrayal of a character.
215-262	Written Response Discussion	Reading Response Assessment Is change possible? "If you don't like something change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain," (Maya Angelou). Do you agree?
263-305 Culminating Activities	Whole Group Discussion Written Response Revisit Silent Dialogue Found Poetry	How to Generate Questions from Themes Student artifacts from pre-reading activity Found Poetry
Across the Curriculum	Discussion Analyze Memoir Write Memoir	Qualities of an Effective Memoir

Silent Dialogue: Reverse the Theme & Define the Character

What is it? Making connections and building on ideas about student assumptions

Resources: List of themes and types of characters from *on the edge*

Student

Responses: Chart paper with written discussion; small and whole group debrief

Getting Started

- Gather chart paper and markers for each student pair.
- Write theme or character in center of chart paper.
- Divide students into teams.
- Model silent dialogue.
- Give pairs 15 minutes to dialogue and at least 15 minutes to meet with a small group.
- Debrief as a whole group.

Silent dialogue occurs between pairs of students who carry on a conversation in writing surrounding a given quote, phrase, or word. It is an ideal pre-reading activity because it brings forth student assumptions in an indirect and unconventional manner. Like passing notes, it teaches students to build on each other's ideas. It can be conversational or more like brainstorming. Here are two options:

Reverse the Theme

Pairs of students participate in silent dialogue about key themes they will encounter in *on the edge*. Students make themes concrete by describing them in terms of specific examples or images, making identifying themes in the text more explicit. For instance, the theme *VIOLENCE* may illicit responses like:

Punching a stranger for no reason
Kicking a puppy
This makes me think of Mortal Kombat!
It also makes me think about how I got mugged under the EI,
(etc.).

Next, students meet with other students who dialogued about the same theme. Then, they write their own pair or group definition. For example, *VIOLENCE* might yield a definition such as:

Violence is hurting someone you know or don't know to get something from them (fear, money).

Suggested themes from *on the edge*:

- SURVIVAL
- VIOLENCE
- RESPECT
- FORGIVENESS
- VALUE

Define the Character

Pairs of students participate in silent dialogue about types of people they will encounter in *on the edge*. Students describe characters in terms of assumptions about how they act, what they look like, what they say and what they feel. For instance, STUDENT may illicit responses like:

*has a lot of homework
carries a backpack that makes her shoulders ache
My mom goes to school and she doesn't carry a
backpack.
I guess students can be young or old. Would a
student have to get good grades?
I think so because it has the word "study" in it,
(etc.).*

Next, students meet with other students who dialogued about the same character type. Then, they write their own pair or group definition. For example, STUDENT might yield a definition such as:

*A student is a person of any age who learns
because of his or her ability, interest,
participation, attitude and effort.*

Suggested character types from *on the edge*:

- MURDERER
- ABUSER
- HOMELESS PERSON
- GANG MEMBER

Since silent dialogue seems safer than a traditional conversation, students may unearth very personal information about themselves. Before the group debriefs, remind students that they are to respect each other's privacy and use their common sense.

The key objective of Silent Dialogue is to help student become comfortable with sharing their thoughts and opening up their assumptions about ideas presented in *on the edge*. By developing shared definitions about theme and character before they read, students will be able to see how their ideas have grown.

Marking the Text & Crafting Questions

What is it? Keeping track of thinking during reading; writing good discussion questions
Resources: *on the edge*, pp. 13-30; overhead or chart of **Types of Questions & Support Student**
Responses: Sticky notes with student questions; chart paper recording discussion

Getting Started

- Gather chart paper and sticky notes for the group.
- Distribute sticky notes to each student for marking text and writing questions.
- Model thinking during read aloud; discuss questions you form as you read.
- Continue to read aloud, stopping periodically for students to write questions.
- Discuss **Types of Questions & Support**.
- Students share their questions and group turns them into good discussion questions.
- Choose student question to generate discussion.
- Debrief and inform students they will continue to mark text using sticky notes as they read *on the edge*.

QAR, or Determining Question/ Answer Relationship, (Raphael et al 2001) helps students ground the discussion in the text, dig deeper into relevant themes and make connections to their lives. If students are aware of the types of questions, they are more likely to craft effective discussion questions and support their ideas effectively.

Effective discussion questions are in the “Think and Search” and “On My Own” categories. Questions should not be crafted to check if students have read. Instead, they should be authentic--questions we do not know the answers to and that require further research by students and teacher, (Harvey & Goudvis 2000). Support of inferences and opinion in written response and discussion should grow from all categories.

Types of Questions & Support

“Right There” → Literal → Clarifying

- Specific
- Right or wrong answer
- Text will prove or disprove
- Used to support inferences, connections and evaluations in literature responses

“Think and Search” → Interpretive → Penetrating

- Can be answered using inference and textual support
- Enlarges comprehension
- Allows for multiple interpretations

“On My Own” → Evaluative

- Can be discussed inside or outside the text
- Personal interpretation
- Over and above the facts
- Assessment or judgment
- Global

Good discussion questions are:

- simple
- open-ended
- engaging
- specific to the book or not
- built from uncertainty or curiosity
- thinking questions
- answerable with text reference, prior knowledge
- non-leading

Reading Response Assessment

What is it? Assessing written response to literature

Resources: Key Questions

Student

Responses: Dialogue journals written to teacher or peer & answered by teacher or peer

Quality	6	5	4	3	2	1
Demonstration of Text Understanding	Shows multi-dimensional understanding of the text. Critiques, interprets and clarifies text through connections, questions and inferences. Provides evidence and rationale (warrants) supporting and explaining ideas and opinions.	Shows multi-dimensional understanding of the text. Interprets and clarifies text through connections, questions and inferences. Provides evidence supporting and explaining ideas.	Shows adequate understanding of text. Interprets and clarifies text. Uses evidence to support ideas.	Shows understanding of the text through clarifying questions and statements. Some personal connections and ideas are present.	Shows limited understanding of the text through clarifying questions and statements.	Shows very little understanding of the text.
Quality	6	5	4	3	2	1
Awareness of Self as Reader & Writer	Shows high level of awareness of reader and/ or writer. Anticipates questions and creates a meaningful dialogue to explore reading/writing process and the connection between these processes. Shows self-diagnosis of reading challenges and asks for help when it is needed.	Shows more than adequate awareness of self as a reader and/or writer. Shows self-diagnosis of reading challenges and asks for help when it is needed. Beginning to see the connection between reading and writing.	Shows adequate awareness of self as a reader and/or writer. Questions the process and responds to questions of process. Asks for help when it is needed.	Shows some awareness of self as a reader and/or writer. Responds to questions of process. Asks for help when it is needed.	Shows little awareness of self as a reader and/or writer.	Shows no awareness of self as reader and/or writer.
Quality	4	3	2	1		
Clarity of Expression	Uses language very effectively to communicate ideas. Ideas are expressed with clarity. Responses are thorough and show best thinking.	Uses language adequately to communicate ideas. Ideas are expressed with clarity.	Shows some difficulty using language to communicate ideas. Responses may be rambling or repetitive.	Is unable to use language effectively to communicate ideas.		
Quality	4	3	2	1		
Voice/ Personality	Uniquely expressed and interesting to read. Voice and personality in the responses are authentic and honest.	Shows voice and personality in responses.	Personality and voice is mostly absent in responses.	Personality and voice is mostly absent. Responses are trite and empty.		
Quality	2			1		
Conventions	Uses conventions accurately so responses are easy to understand.			Use of conventions make writing difficult to read and understand.		

Adapted from *Rubric for Response Journals* (Fountas & Pinnell 183).

Reader's Theater & Questioning the Character

What is it? Performing scenes from the novel to empathize with characters

Resources: *on the edge*, pp. 198-214

Student

Responses: Performance; discussion

Getting Started

- Photocopy pages from the novel.
- Describe Reader's Theater process and model using a picture book, poem, or short story.
- Divide students into teams.
- Direct students to highlight segments, add narration and dialogue, etc. Scenes should be brief and meaningful.
- After performances, students stay in character and answer questions from the audience.
- Debrief as a whole group.

Reader's Theater involves small groups of students acting out scenes from a novel. The script is the novel itself with minimal changes to bridge gaps. There is no memorization, limited rehearsal and performance without full costumes or props. Reader's Theater allows for dramatic presentation and its rewards—empathy, improved comprehension, fluency and social and collaborative skills—without a huge time commitment. Learning continues after the performance as students stay in character and answer questions from the audience, (*The Power of Reader's Theater* 2003). Reader's Theater can be expanded to include questions and letters to the author.

Assessment for Reader's Theater

Well Developed	Developed	Beginning to Develop	Not Yet Developed
Student has demonstrated an advanced ability to analyze the text by effectively responding to questions using information from the text and inferential reasoning.	Student has demonstrated an ability to analyze the text by effectively responding to most questions using information from the text and inferential reasoning.	Student's ability to analyze the text is not yet developed: effective responses to questions using information from the text are few and inferential reasoning is not in evidence.	Student has not demonstrated an ability to analyze the text. Responses are inappropriate, as are questions posed to other performers.
Student poses thoughtful questions to other performers.	Student poses some thoughtful questions to other performers.	Questions posed to other performers are irrelevant or inappropriate.	

Assessment of student comprehension of text through Reader's Theater is twofold:

- Students' ability to respond to student-generated questions using contextual and inferential information
- Student audience's ability to develop in-depth questions

How to Generate Questions from Themes

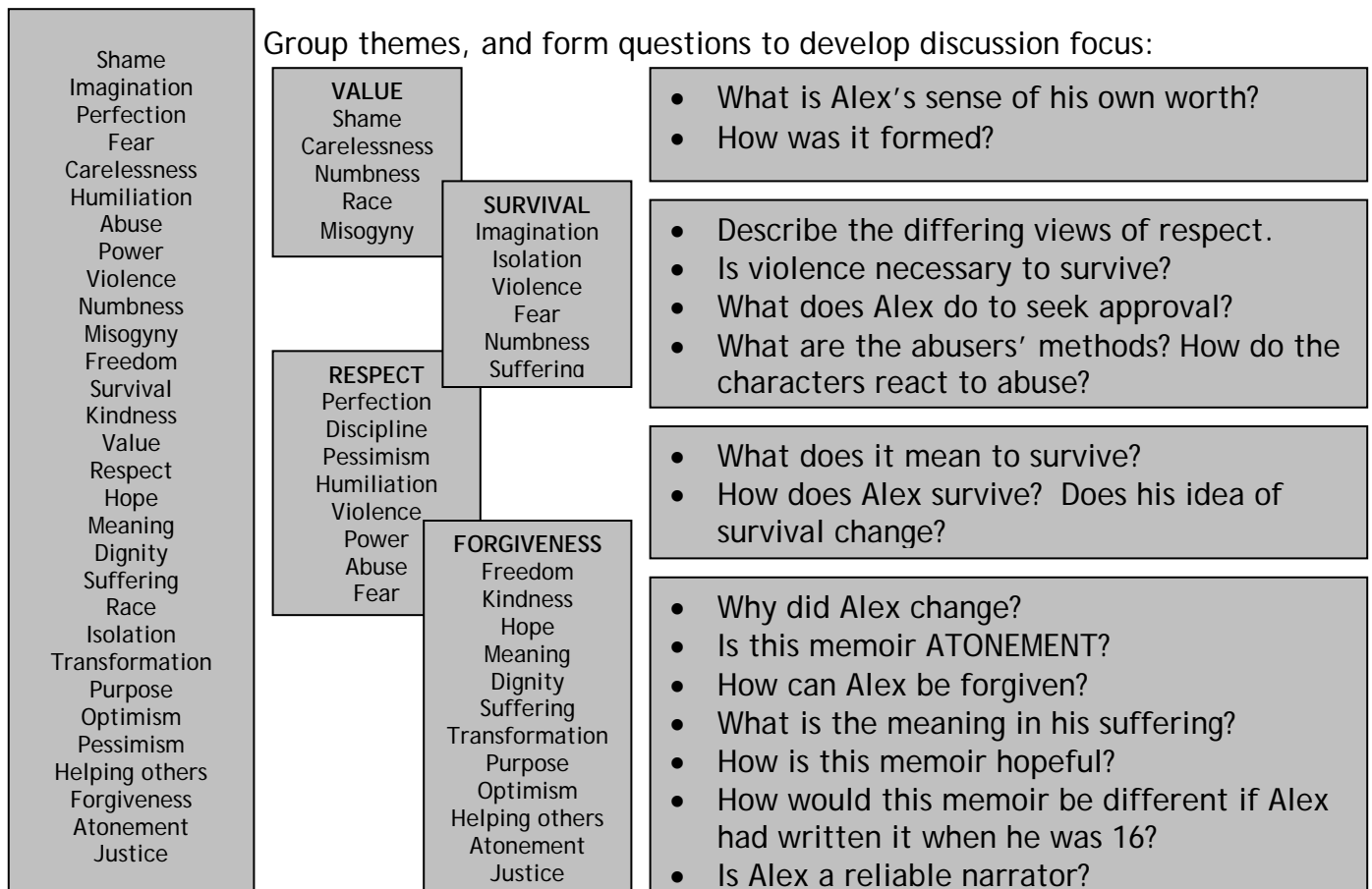
- What is it?** Generating questions from themes to launch final discussion
- Resources:** *on the edge*; overhead or chart of **Types of Questions & Support Student**
- Responses:** Chart of student-generated themes and questions; discussion

Getting Started

- After reviewing **Norms for Discussion**, ask each student to think of one word that encapsulates what the story is about. Give them a few minutes.
- As students share their words, record them on an overhead, chart, etc. Make sure they are nouns (themes) and suggest more powerful words if necessary.
- While students are sharing or after all have shared, ask students: Can we group any of these? What do you see here? Any other ideas?
- Group themes according to student responses.
- Develop a focus to begin discussion based on the most relevant/pervasive theme group.
- Develop questions.
- Maintain focus and redirect students to the text and chosen focus.

All students must contribute in developing a focus. If they have a part in determining the direction of the conversation, they will be likely to participate. Although students should determine the focus of the discussion, it is important to anticipate possibilities.

Anticipated List of Student-Generated Themes



Found Poetry

What is it? Expressing culminating understanding of *on the edge: a memoir*
Resources: *on the edge*
Student
Responses: Discussion; small-group poetry

Getting Started

- Gather strips of paper (sentence strips work well) and markers for each student. Each student receives two strips of paper.
- Distribute and describe **Found Poetry Individual Directions**.
- Give students 5-10 minutes to choose their passages.
- Divide students into groups of 4-6.
- Distribute and describe **Found Poetry Group Directions**.
- Give student groups at least twenty minutes to organize poem and practice reading it aloud. Give groups tape and extra paper strips.
- After each poem is read, students discuss its message and connection to *on the edge*.

Poetry is wonderful in that it encapsulates huge, abstract ideas concisely. **Found Poetry** uses pieces of the text reassembled into free verse poetry to express culminating ideas about the text.

Found Poetry Individual Directions

- Select two pieces of the text that are meaningful to you. They should be short--less than 15 words each. In fact, they may be one or two words.
- Write one text selection on each strip of paper with the page number. Write clearly and with no errors. You should be able to read it from across the room.

Found Poetry Group Directions

- It is your goal to use all or most of the text pieces to compose a poem that communicates something about *on the edge: a memoir*.
- The poem will be free verse; it does not have to rhyme.
- Take your time. Lay out all the strips so everyone can see them, read them all aloud and see if a pattern emerges. Try several different arrangements.
- Text pieces may be repeated or deleted to create a more cohesive poem. Your group will receive extra paper strips and tape. The sentence strips are for repeated phrases. The tape is to join the strips together.
- After your poem is complete, practice how it will be read to the rest of the class. Be innovative.
- When you listen to other group poems, think about how their message differs from yours.

Qualities of an Effective Memoir

What is it? Determining qualities of an effective memoir to launch student writing
Resources: *on the edge*
Student
Responses: Discussion; chart listing qualities of an effective memoir

Getting Started

- Select one event from *on the edge* to model its purpose in the memoir.
- Discuss why the author chose to include it. Ask students: Is it essential? Why or why not?
- Divide class into teams.
- Teams choose two events from *on the edge* and analyze each for significance.
- Return to whole group and debrief. Discuss the necessity of purposeful events in a memoir.
- Brainstorm other qualities of *on the edge* that make it effective. It will be most meaningful if students generate the list.
- Discuss ways to begin writing memoir. Good resources can be found online.

Genre analysis is another way to look at a text critically. When analysis serves as a prelude to students writing their own memoirs, it is especially powerful. Analyzing *on the edge* will help students build introspection and become more purposeful in choosing textual detail.

Example of Determining Purpose of Events within a Memoir

EVENT: Alex's grandfather takes him to the movies.

Is it essential? Yes

WHY or WHY NOT? It makes Alex wish to have a normal life, but makes him realize that he can not run forever.

Qualities of an Effective Memoir

- Writing is engaging and gripping
- The pace allows readers to visualize
- Every event is purposeful
- Focused with events building toward the author changing and learning
- Told in first person
- Shows introspection
- Possesses the devices of great fiction: dialogue, characterization, narration, sensory details, interesting vocabulary, flashback, flash forward, setting, theme
- Details are invented to enrich and fill in the memory blanks of the story
- Shows how the author changed
- Makes the reader connect to his or her experiences
- Makes the reader care about the author: empathy
- Makes the reader think and feel something at the end

Chart adapted from *Qualities of a Memoir that Works* (Atwell 100).
Activity adapted from *Understanding the Structure of a Memoir*, (Lattimer 49).

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