



It Doesn't Have to Rhyme

Curriculum Unit 89.02.04
by Pamela M. Fowler

“Poetry presents the thing
in order to convey the feeling
It should be precise about the thing
and reticent about the feeling, for
as soon as the mind connects with the thing
the feeling shows in the words;
this is how poetry enters deeply into
us. ”

Author Unknown

“Poetry?!?” “I hate it” “It’s okay.” “I like it . . .” Those are only a few of the usual responses teachers receive when they mention the word ‘poetry’ to their class. Regardless of their age, many children don’t particularly care for it unless they have been exposed to and have had a positive experience with poetry. The reason is simple. I believe that they do not see poetry in relation to themselves or to their surroundings. To them it is another world.

My Class

I currently teach fifth and sixth grade special education students in a self-contained classroom. All of my students have been placed with me because of the difficulties they have experienced in the regular

classroom. The reasons vary. They may be medical or emotional or have to do with the child's past experiences which have interfered with their normal learning processes.

My students present the following characteristics in my classroom:

- poor reading skills, word attack skills, word recognition, word identification
- poor reading comprehension skills
- no knowledge of correct punctuation or grammar usage
- low self-esteem
- high frustration levels
- and in most cases these all yield to social problems.

As their teacher, I have the responsibility to attend to each characteristic separately and somehow redirect the child as a whole person so that they may be able to function properly and appropriately in a society setting as well as in the school environment.

School has proven itself to be difficult for my students, but they find the easy life on the streets and adapt well. There in the streets amongst all the drug dealings, prostitution and crime, the kids slowly, but effectively, lose sense of themselves. After day to day survival on the streets, they get lost so much that they don't even know who the person inside of them is. They become so hostile and so apathetic.

A problem I face on a daily basis is regression. At any point in my lessons, I can touch so a sensitive spot in any child that they will withdraw and regress in a blink of an eye. In our writing workshop they begin to learn how to come in contact with those sensitive areas and also how to handle them effectively. They learn at their own pace and then slowly as a class we deal with all the problems they face openly and honestly and try our best to work through them by identifying avenues that work the best for them. I will admit, it scares them a lot and at times it scares me also. I am willing to take the time necessary to bring my students to a higher level of thinking logically, and I work through this by teaching writing.

The Writing Workshop

At the present time my class and I are involved in a self developed writing workshop. At the opening of the school year, the students approached writing with a great deal of uncertainties. They were uncertain about me, for they had never met me before this day, uncertain about the school, and mostly uncertain about themselves.

They had imagined I'd ask them to write about themselves their lives, where and how they managed to survive and many personal thoughts. Yes. They were right on target. From day one I asked for it all. To make them a bit more at ease before I required the papers to be written, we shared our lives orally and I started by sharing a very intimate part of my life I knew they would relate to—the death of my father. Next it was their

turn. The following day the time came to write it down on paper and learn the process of writing and the daily procedures of our writing workshop.

As the months passed, their fears diminished and their insecurities turned into self confidence. They trusted me and what's more impotent is the evidence that the workshop is a valuable part of their education The pieces they have created are funny, enthusiastic and exciting. Their pieces are a very important part of themselves.

Through our writing workshop my students know and understand the six stages of writing.

1. Prewriting—The first stage in which ideas are generated and written down in the form of a web, cluster or list. Commonly known as brainstorming, or mind-mapping.
2. Drafting—The stage where the author writes his/her first draft without paying attention of showing concern for mechanics.
3. Editing—The stage where the author rereads the draft and makes the necessary correction and adds any revisions where appropriate.
4. Revisioning—The stage where the author rereads the draft and tries to see the work in a different light, changing ideas and re-working paragraphs so that the visions are clear to a reader.
5. Publishing—The point in which the author has completed his/ her work and publishes in either a bound book or typed and submitted to a local magazine or newspaper.
6. Performance—The point in the workshop where the author reads a completed work aloud to an audience.

During the workshop the teacher must be willing to commit five days a week for 42 to 44 minutes a day. The workshop requires a great deal of energy on the part of the teacher. The energy exhibited will be absorbed by the class and returned in their daily writing.

The class day's breakdown is as follows:

2 minutes—Workshop preparation: The teacher or student passes out each child's folder and paper for the day.

5 minutes—Mini-lesson: Five minutes spent before the writing to explain and/or demonstrated correct grammatical techniques, usage, etc. This time can also be spent to introduce a particular writing style. The two may also be combined so that you get the most of the time. In addition, questions will be entertained at this time.

25 minutes—Quiet Uninterrupted Writing Time/Conferences: This is the time that each child is involved in writing for 25 minutes uninterrupted. The teacher spends this time conferencing with students on a one-on-one basis.

10 minutes—Share Session: During the final ten minutes, the students share their pieces with each other. They read their work aloud to the class. The class in turn responds to their writing in a positive way by telling the author what they liked about the piece and why.

2 minutes—Clean Up

The Poetry Workshop

The daily format for the poetry workshop follows the same format as the narrative writing workshop, with a few minor changes.

A. 10 minutes: Reading selected poems Mini-lessons and discussions

B. 15 minutes: Explanation of formula class model

C. 10 minutes: Quiet uninterrupted Writing Time

D. 7 minutes : Share time

The best way to introduce poetry to children is to involve them in it. The best way to involve them in it is to read to them and allow them to read to you and to each other. They need to be exposed to all forms of poetry daily. The poetry should be from all walks of life. Explore poems of heritage, love and despair, poems written by adults, children, Afro-Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics and Asians. They should not be tied to one poet or style because the poet or works depict the child's lifestyle. They need full exposure to the art form in order for them to understand and hopefully enjoy it.

Mini-lessons are based on what aspect of the poem the class is to focus on. For organizational purposes I assume that no student in my class knows about poetry. So, I begin at the beginning. My beginning is to focus on "You Can Write Good Poetry" no matter what your topic is. As the class becomes more comfortable with poetry, basics and a few characteristics are taught depending on the level of the class and what they are capable of handling.

The mini-lesson lasts no longer than two to five minutes. The object is to get to the point of the lesson and get that point across to the students before you lose their attention. To get your point across use modeling as a concrete learning device. Once the time has lapsed move on to the next order of business. Nine out of ten students in the classroom, regular and special education, have attention spans of approximately five minutes, and that is five minutes of continuous attention. Continuous means that the child is focused on you and listening to you, the teacher for five minutes. After that five minutes is over they "space-out" for one or two minutes, then refocus on the lesson being taught. As the teacher I want to capture the student during those two to five minutes that I have their attention and teach the facts, the information which is most vital to their

education at that time. A mini-lesson is structured to accomplish that goal.

Discussions are an important part of this unit. They are implemented so that both teacher and student participate fully and so that each has a clear understanding of what the other is talking about and the topic at hand. Discussions clarify misunderstandings and expectations.

The worst possible way to write poetry is to sit down and 'search' for something to write about. It is not only time consuming, but also frustrating, and a frustrated writer is not a good writer. The first thing you approach is to teach the class to ignore the entire question of "What do I write about?" The next step is to teach them that they have plenty to write about in the form of poems, and that their job is to keep from mucking it up by paying too much attention to it. It must emerge by itself.

Think of the writing of poems as the playing of a game. As in any game you must have some set rules to play by. You also need strategies and formulas if you are going to win the game. These rules set the boundaries so that you are not teaching a clutter of things at the same time and then expecting the class to decipher them by themselves, after all you are there to make things easier to work with rather than more difficult. One basic rule is that there must be some sort of a beat or a rhythm of some kind. Nine out of ten times the beat comes naturally.

In the first sessions I try to impress upon the class not to worry so much about trying to write 'good' lines, but to just keep on writing whatever is in their mind, to go with the flow and let their thoughts and feelings take over. For many new writers this is the most difficult task.

This brings me to the second basic rule I use. You must write a string of lines without stopping. Even if the words are or seem to be repetitive, boring or stupid at the time, the finished product can surprise even the most 'accomplished' writer.

Most of the unit is spent introducing and working with assorted styles of poetry. The first style is entitled parallelism (using the same word to begin every line). The objective is to focus and better organize the students' thoughts. I begin the year with one line formulas.

The introduction of parallelism is simple. Say to your students, "You are going to think of everything you ever wished for and write it down on paper the exact same way that I write it on the board." Go to the black board, choose a student and ask him/her to make a wish and tell you. Then write it in the same form as follows:

I WISH . . .

Ask the same question of another student and write it under the first wish and continue until you have nine lines. The tenth line is the wish which completes the poem. Change the final line to read:

AND I REALLY WISH . . .

My class created the following poem on their first day of their poetry workshop:

I wish for every poor person to be fed.
I wish for children to go to school to learn.
I wish for this city to be clean.
I wish for the healthiest pet.

I wish for the wealthiest yet.
I wish for pencils.
I wish for stencils.
I wish for January.
I wish for JULY!
And I really wish for everybody to be happy.

Now step back away from the board and read or have a student read the poem aloud, Congratulate them for creating their very first group poem. Give them a moment to take it all in and reread the poem to themselves. The direct the class to individually imitate the group poem. Allow ten minutes for quiet uninterrupted writing time. I find that the less amount of time that you give them to write the more they will produce. Let the class know that they “Only have ten minutes to come up with ten lines of wishes.” I find that this put just enough pressure on them that the adrenaline starts pumping and their brains start working.

While the class is writing, copy the group poem from the board for the class anthology and then imitate the poem yourself. Children learn from what they see more than from what they are told. That is why it is important for the teacher to write with the class and share his/her poems as well. If the teacher takes this unit seriously then so will the entire class.

While the class is writing many children will become hooked on the proper way to spell certain words. You don't want to limit their vocabulary by ignoring the problem, but at the same time you don't want to limit their creativity by having them stop in the middle of a sentence to become preoccupied with the correct spelling and usage of a particular word. More than often the word they are concerned about is going to be the same word everytime they write.

To eliminate this problem and to encourage the use of creative vocabulary I use the 'Spelling Box' in my writing workshop. The Spelling Box is a process I introduce to my class the first day of class and use it in all subjects, no just writing.

When a child is writing and he/she does not know how to spell a word they are told to spell it just as they hear it pronounced. For example you are a student and you are writing a short poem and want to use the use the word phenomenon, but don't know how to spell it. Sound out the word or say the word over and over in your mind and ask yourself 'What is the first sound I hear?' Your answer may be /f/. Then ask yourself, 'What letter(s) make that sound?' You may come up with the answer PH because somewhere you remember seeing that word and know it does not start with the letter F even though it begins with the /f/ sound.

So the first letters you write down are PH. You go through this process until you think you have spelled the word the best you could.

Using this process you may have spelled the word as follows:

PHINAMINAM

You know that this is not the proper way to spell it, but it is spelled phonetically and to the best of your ability. As long as you can read that word and know that that word is phenomenon that is all that matters, and you have reached your goal. Now you can go on to writing your poem and get your ideas out on paper without stifling creativity. This process is called Invented Spelling. You actually make-up the spelling of words that you do not know or unsure of.

After the poem is written you then go through an editing process.

1. Meet with the teacher to discuss the poem and any problems that you may be experiencing.
2. Reread the poem and circle all the words YOU feel are misspelled.
3. Look in the spelling box for the words that you circled and correct the spelling.
4. Rewrite the poem with all the necessary corrections.

HOW TO MAKE A SPELLING BOX

Materials:

1. Shoe Box
2. 300-400 3x5 index cards (I prefer to use unlined)
3. 3x5 alphabet divider
4. Black marker
5. Reading Word List

The spelling box is created day by day throughout the school year. The first words that you may want to start off with are words from a basic reading series, simple nouns and verbs or just words off the top of your head. I start with the names of the children in my class that year, the names of the streets around the neighborhood, and the city, state, teachers and principal of the school. The box builds slowly as the days go on. The students are actually developing a 'dictionary' that is appropriate for their use. As the students come up with words

that are not found in the box already, ask them to bring to you a marker and a blank index card. Write the word on the card correctly and have the child return it to the box and place it under the appropriate letter, so that the words are in alphabetical order. By the end of the year you will have a wide variety of vocabulary to start the next year with.

This entire process eliminates interruptions and promotes the uninterrupted writing time.

After the ten minutes are up stop the class for a seven to ten minute share time. If they moan and groan that is simply prove that they are beginning to enjoy what they are doing and will more than likely internalize what they are writing.

During share sessions each student is required to stand in front of the class and read their poems. When the author is done the class reflects on what was read and points out one or two specific ideas or lines which they particularly like and tell the author why. The objective is twofold: 1. To develop positive critiquing styles and 2. To develop listening skills and improve them.

The technique of pointing gives encouragement to the writer who thinks his/her piece stinks. When another student says, "I like it when you said . . .," it gives such a boost to the ego. For a student to be encouraged by his/her fourteen peers develops self-esteem quicker than words of praise from any adult. The adult supervises and assists in monitoring the share session, but the most important effect is from their peers.

Revising the poem is very simple. Reread the poem and cut away the excess, the words that make the poem awkward and clumsy, but leave those words that make the poem work. Leave the "juice".

As far as titles go, they come after the poem is written. Sometimes they have helped formulate the poet's ideas even before the poem is written. Other poets have found the title to be a hindrance. In short it all really depends on the author and how he/ she feels at that time.

Just keep in mind that this unit is meant to be fun and make the writing of poetry more of a game rather than a chore that students have to complete in exchange for a grade.

The following pages are lessons with specific information regarding poems to use, mini-lessons that can make the poems easier to comprehend and to write, formulas that have proven to be successful in my classroom and some questions that the students have asked about their assignments. Use them in order as I have written them or mix and match the lessons as you find it appropriate for your particular class.

You will find supplemental readings for the children from Kenneth Koch's "Wishes, Lies and Dreams". There are fifteen paperback copies located at the Teacher's Institute Office at 53 Wall Street for the teacher to use.

There are also copies of the poems listed in the lessons that I have chosen to use at the Teacher's Institute Office. Feel free to make a set for yourself and keep them for your classes.

Before beginning the unit, it is advisable that the teacher take the time to read the following section from Koch's book: *Teaching Children to Write Poetry* pages 7-55.

LESSON 1

A. *Introduction to Poetry*

Ask the class: “What do you think/feel, if anything, about poetry?”

Wait for responses.

Ask class: “Who knows a poem?”

Wait for a response or two. If no one responds start reciting a nursery rhyme . . . let the class finish it.

Read the selected poems aloud to the class:

1. The Giving Tree—Shel Silverstein
2. Still Here—Langston Hughes
3. Alone—Ralph Kenon

Discuss each poem separately or cooperatively and ask the class “Did you like the poem(s)? Why or why not?”

Ask the class: “Do poems always have to rhyme?”

Wait for class to respond ‘No’

Ask class: “What do you think/feel about writing poetry, if anything at all?”

Wait for responses and discuss all thoughts.

B. *Writing*

Begin with introducing parallelism. (Refer to section in essay which discusses parallelism and gives models.)

Use Koch’s ‘Wishes Lies and Dreams’

Teacher read page 86 to prepare.

Class read pages 66-85 ‘WISHES’

DAY’S FORMULA AND ASSIGNMENTS : ‘I wish . . .’ Ten lines—No rhyming.

C. *QUIET UNINTERRUPTED WRITING TIME*

D. *SHARE TIME*

Pointing: Refer to the section in the essay which discusses share time after the poem is read to the class.

LESSON II

A. READING OF SELECTED POEMS

Have a student read the following poems aloud. If no student want to read the teacher will just have to read.

1. Sonnet for my Father—Donald Justice
2. Archy, the cockroach, Speaks—Don Marquis
3. What If—Shel Silverstein

Discuss what the class liked about the poem(s) and what they didn't. Discuss any problems which were vague.

Mini-Lesson: Line—Stanza

Using the above poems as models, identify each line and stanza. If you have photocopied the poems for each student, have them read through the poem(s) and mark on their paper to identify lines and stanzas. If not, use a transparency or the blackboard and have the children mark 'L' for line and 'S' for stanza.

Discussion/Questions

B. WRITING

Koch—WISHES pages 66-85

DAY'S FORMULA AND ASSIGNMENTS : 'I Wish . . .' Ten lines.

Alternating lines rhyme (1&3, 2&4, 5&7, and 9&10).

C. QUIET UNINTERRUPTED WRITING TIME

D. SHARE TIME

Pointing: Same as Lesson I

LESSON III

A. READING OF SELECTED POEMS

Pass out photocopies of the selected poems for the class to read along.

Go around the classroom and have each student read a line out loud of one poem. Then have the children alternate reading. Finally chose one student to read alone.

Ask the class which way they liked better, or did they like all three readings? Ask if they got a different feeling from each reading. Discuss.

1. Basketball—Nikki Giovanni
2. Africa—Langston Hughes
3. Cat—Mary Britton Miller

Mini-Lesson: Review Line—Stanza

Have each child identify the lines and stanzas of each poem.

Intonation

Using a poem with dialogue (What's in the Sack?) Have the children read with different tones; anger, gaiety, silliness, a rap beat, etc. Then read it with no expression at all and ask the class what tone fits the poem the best and why. Discuss their answers and why it works and why the others do not work so well.

B. *WRITING*

Koch—Lies pages 192-197 Teacher read page 198.

DAY'S FORMULA AND ASSIGNMENTS : 'Once' Five lines minimum; rhyming is the author's option. Keep in mind intonation: it will be used during share time.

C. *QUIET UNINTERRUPTED WRITING TIME*

D. *SHARE TIME*

During this share time the authors are to stand in front of the class and read their poem with the tone of voice they deem appropriate. Praise the class for good listening and also praise the author for a mature reading.

Pointing: Same as in Lessons I and II. This time as a factor. The audience not only has to tell the author what they liked in the poem, but also why they liked that particular part. This session a lot of responses may be due to the way the poem was read.

If this persist as the share time goes on, try to refocus the class back to what the author has written. If you see that this is a problem have the author reread the poem in a regular tone of voice, get some comments from the class and then allow the author to read the poem again in their chosen tone of voice.

C. *QUIET UNINTERRUPTED WRITING TIME*

D. *SHARE TIME*

Pointing: Same as Lesson III

LESSON V

A. READING OF SELECTED POEMS

Pass out photocopies of the poems for the class to read along with. At this point you may want to try some choral reading with the class. Choral reading is an excellent tool when there are children in your class who are two to three reading grade levels below the class average, or if a child cannot read at all. This way the child is not threatened by reading aloud alone in front of his/her peers. It eliminates stress and the threat of embarrassment.

1. Keeping Things Whole—Mark Strand
2. Africa—Langston Hughes
3. Messy Room—Shel Silverstein

Mini Lesson : Sonnet

At this point you will want to review the 'rules' pertaining to a sonnet and practice with a group poem before you let the students write on their own.

Entertain questions and clear up any problems the class might have with their writing.

This is a good opportunity to have each sonnet read and have the class help the authors clear up any problems.

You may chose to keep the class in small groups for this assignment.

Discussions/Questions

B. WRITING

Koch—NOISES pages 107-125 Teacher read page 126

DAY'S FORMULA AND ASSIGNMENT: Continue work with sonnet

LESSON VI

A. READING OF SELECTED POEMS

Pass out photocopies of the selected poems for the class to read along.

Choose a child to read the poem(s) aloud. Put emphasis on the pervious lesson on intonation.

1. Bothering Me at Last—David Ignatow
2. Poem—Mark Strand

3. The Sitter—Shel Silverstein

4. Something Missing—Shel Silverstein

Mini Lesson: Sonnet

A sonnet is a poem consisting of 14 lines. Each alternating line rhymes as follows:

a-b a-b c-d c-d e-f e-f g-g

B. WRITING

Koch DREAMS pages 128-136

Teacher read page 137

DAY'S FORMULA AND ASSIGNMENTS:

Work through completing a sonnet as a group project. If the class seems to be grasping the idea, split the up into groups and have them work on a sonnet of their own.

When splitting the class up into groups keep them small. Three or four children per group is enough.

The children in the group should vary in level. One child who is at a high level, two who are at an average or medium level, and one who is functioning at a lower level.

Keep in mind also that personalities are important when splitting the class into groups. You may want a strong personality with one who is a 'behavior problem' and a shy personality with a more timid and easy personality who will bring out ideas from this shy child.

C. *QUIET UNINTERRUPTED WRITING TIME*

D. *SHARE TIME*

Pointing: Same as Lesson IV.

For Lessons #12 and #13 on description of a real person, teacher or student a basic formats to follow is:

I know a (man, woman, person, boy, girl) who often wears ____. He/She ____ _____ . . .

Write 6-8 lines describing the person. Don't name the person. Use it during share time and have the author read the description to the class and see if the class can guess who it is the author was trying to describe.

A useful mini-lesson is to discuss images and personal aspects that give each person their individuality. This lesson can be modified into a game. Give the class ten minutes to describe a person. Read it aloud and have the class guess the identity of the person described.

After three weeks have passed and the class has been writing an assortment of poems, they are ready for a surprise. For five to ten days incorporate music into the writing of poetry. Yes, you are introducing RAP.

Children enjoy music a great deal and seem to think that nothing is better than the Raps they hear by the

famous rappers like Heavy D and the Boyz, Koo Moo Dee, Salt 'n Pep to name just a few. To keep the class interested in the poetry and also to keep them on their toes, I have incorporated the performing of poetry reading with musical accompaniment.

There are two ways to work this idea:

The first:

Have the child write the poem first and discuss, during a conference, the feeling that they want to get across to the audience. After the conference have the child select from a collection of instrumental music a tune that is appropriate for the poem, and what they want their audience to feel.

Allow the child time and space for rehearsal to make sure that his/her choice is what they wanted. If not start all over again.

The second:

Reverse the above process. Have the child select an instrumental version of a song, identify the feeling/emotion they feel from the music and then write a poem which depicts that mood.

The two techniques render very interesting pieces. As with any piece of information taught, these two techniques may prove to be difficult for some children while others find it fairly easy. The object is to have children use their inductive and deductive techniques. The main objective is FUN!

In Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* read the chapter entitled 'Poems Written While Listening to Music' pages 224-244. The teacher should read page 245.

The final phase of this workshop is performance. At the end of the year, an Author's Tea will be held. Each Author will select the two or three poems that he/she feels is their best work over the entire year.

The children will plan and execute the Tea themselves with the teacher as supervisor. Each child will make a list of those adults they would like to invite to the Tea. Names should include parents, guardians, family members, friends teachers, principals and school personnel from the central offices. A guest speaker is also appropriate. Have invitations already prepared for the class to fold and stuff into envelopes. The Tea last no longer than an hour and a half.

Upon completion of the reading, conclude the tea with distribution of certificates for each author. (You may want to award them a gift also) Certificates are most memorable when they are awarded to the author by a special guest. Finally, invite the guest to join in a reception of tea, coffee and finger sandwiches.

Make this Tea special for you and your children. Dress up and insist on appropriate behavior and manners. Video tape it and have a guest sign in book.

For the students it may be nice to photocopy the poems, bind them and give them to the guest as they arrive. Just before the reception announce that the authors will be available to sign their work. Encourage this time. It will further develop self-esteem in the students.

The following pages are lessons, reading selections formulas and writing assignments, pages to read from Kenneth Koch's book as well as suggested strategies, sequences and formulas to use throughout this unit.

Due to space Lessons VI-XVI can be found at the Teacher's Institute Office at 53 Wall Street.

SUGGESTED SEQUENCES

One line sequences

I wish . . .

Once . . .

Now . . .

Remember . . .

Yes . . .

No . . .

And . . .

It seems . . .

I have a dream . . .

Oh . . .

Name of someone you know

Name of a loved one

But on the other hand . . .

Elicit ideas from class.

Two line sequences

Once . . . Now . . .

It seems . . . but really . . .

If . . . Then . . .

Why . . . ? Because . . . !

Descriptions

Teachers

Students

Friends

Neighbors

Toys

A room in the house

Places

Animals

Pets

Plants

Clothing

Posters

SUGGESTED FORMULAS

Make each line a lie.

Make each line a dream.

Each line **MUST** mention a color.

Each line **MUST** mention a word in Spanish.

Each line **MUST** mention a part of the body.

Each line **MUST** mention a city.

Each line **MUST** mention an article of clothing.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

Party Game Poetry

Each child writes one line given one of the restrictions: 1. with each person knowing all of the previous lines. 2. with each person knowing only the preceding line. 3. with everyone blind to the other lines. Have each child read their line aloud or collect them and have one person read the entire poem.

Pooling

Pool stanzas with any of the previously mentioned sequences. Assign each person a separate room in a house and have the class write four lines. After they have written the line combine all the stanzas and organize it with the class to come to a group decision of what order they prefer the stanzas to be in.

Dear Diary

Make a poem by writing it as a real letter to somebody you know, to yourself as if the poem was in your diary.

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