

Halfway There: Getting Poetry—and Getting Better at It

Presenters:



Brandon Abdon

AP English consultant and author



Meg Neville

AP Lit teacher, table leader, and author

Wednesday, Jan. 28
at 7 p.m. EST

**PERFECTION
LEARNING®**

HELLO
my name is

Please drop your (1) name,
(2) location, and (3) Super
Bowl prediction (if you have
one)

“Halfway There: Getting Poetry—and Getting Better at It (with special guest Megan Neville)”



February 2026

Megan Neville

- Teacher since 2004
- AP reader since 2016 (TL since 2024)
- College Board consultant
- National Board Certification in 2013
- NWP Teacher Consultant since 2007
- Individual poems/essays published in McSweeney's, [Poets.org](https://www.poets.org), West Branch, Pleiades, The Pinch, Grist, etc.
- Split Lip Magazine since 2018 (poetry reader → editorial assistant)
- Poetry collections published in 2019 & 2022
- Email me to ask about this summer's APSIs!





- In the Chat
- Take your time to think and write.
- This is rough-draft thinking, so no pressure.
- Do Not Hit Enter until asked to.



Where are you and/or your students when it comes to poetry?

AND/OR

What do you/they need to get to the next level?



1. Sentences / Structure

- a. Read Sentence as Thoughts
- b. Pay close attention to how they are organized and what that could say.

2. Lines and their Endings

3. Tension / Complexity



Our Text

Love and Friendship by Emily Bronte

Love is like the wild rose-briar,
Friendship like the holly-tree—
The holly is dark when the rose-briar blooms
But which will bloom most constantly?

5 The wild rose-briar is sweet in spring,
Its summer blossoms scent the air;
Yet wait till winter comes again
And who will call the wild-briar fair?

10 Then scorn the silly rose-wreath now
 And deck thee with the holly's sheen,
That when December blights thy brow
He still may leave thy garland green.

Our Text

Elegy for a Woman of No Importance (or “or Images from a Baghdadi Alley”) by Nazik al-Malaika

She died, but no lips shook, no cheeks turned white
no doors heard her death tale told and retold,
no blinds were raised for small eyes to behold
the casket as it disappeared from sight.

5 Only a beggar in the street, consumed
by hunger, heard the echo of her life—
the safe forgetfulness of tombs,
the melancholy of the moon.

10 The night gave way to morning thoughtlessly,
and light brought with it sound—boys throwing stones,
a hungry, mewling cat, all skin and bones,
the vendors fighting, clashing bitterly,
some people fasting, others wanting more,
polluted water gurgling, and a breeze
15 playing, alone, upon the door
having almost forgotten her.

Our Text

Mexican American Sonnet by Iliana Rocha (2019)

We have the same ankles, hips, nipples, knees—
our bodies bore the forks/tenedors
we use to eat. What do we eat? Darkness
from cathedral floors,

5 the heart's woe in abundance. Please let us
go through the world touching what we want,
knock things over. Slap & kick & punch
until we get something right. ¿Verdad?

Isn't it true, my father always asks.

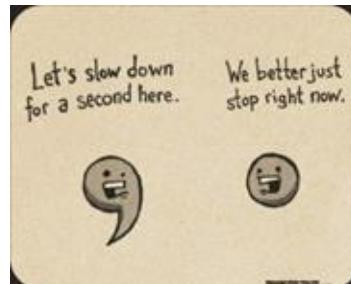
10 Your father is the ghost of mine & vice
versa. & when did our pasts
stop recognizing themselves? It was always like

us to first person: yo. To disrupt a hurricane's
path with our own inwardness.

15 C'mon huracán, you watery migraine,
prove us wrong for once. This sadness
lasts/esta tristeza perdura. Say it both ways
so language doesn't bite back, but stays.

#1 Read Sentences

- Punctuation = “Road Signs” for Thinking
- Sentences = Complete Thoughts
- Stanza = An Idea (like a paragraph)



Read Sentences

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Instructions on Not Giving Up

Ada Limón

More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out
of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's
almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving
their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate
sky of Spring rains, **it's the greening of the trees**
that really gets to me. When all the shock of white
and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave
the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath,
the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin
growing over whatever winter did to us, a return
to the strange idea of continuous living despite
the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then,
I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf
unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.

Meg's Note: I use "Instructions on Not Giving Up" with my students to help them understand the function of different sentence structures in a poem. This helps them learn to recognize when and how structure enhances content (which is a great feature of a poem for them to write about!).

Another great poem to use in the same way is "[A Small Needful Fact](#)" by Ross Gay. Eloisa Amezcua's "[Teaching My Mother English Over the Phone](#)" is also good.

Origin

By Katie Condon

I was born inside a mourning dove.
There is wind in all of us.

Here I am
in a century that has its eyes

shut tight—don't I know exactly
why I'm here: in the end

the sun varnishes us all
in amber. Undress

for that light. There is flight
in all of us. Find me

in the pasture sewing
bluebonnets into each bend

of our laughter. I was born
inside the decayed mourning

dove you found shaded
in lavender. Call me *maggot*.

When you die, don't worry.
I will rise up from you

opaque as the angel
admiring your rotted waist.

I, too, will die—am
dying—though I

am a maggot, though I covet
fragrance from your breathless

flowering. I am born
from grieving. I am

Meg's Note:

I give my students a copy of this poem with all of the punctuation removed. They get 15-20 minutes to contemplate what punctuation is needed where; they then present their decisions and we discuss before looking at what the poet herself did.

Read Sentences

Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

#2 Break It Up / Block It

- Blocks or “Chunks” = Comprehension & Meaning
- Label / Name Them = Labels relate to
Comprehension & Meaning
- Identify Lit Elem and = These things create the
Tech in the Blocks meaning

1. Sentences / Structure

- a. Read Sentence as Thoughts
- b. Pay close attention to how they are organized and what that could say.

2. Lines and their Endings

- a. The only difference between poetry and prose
- b. Look for unstopped lines (enjambment)

3. Tension / Complexity



Line Endings

Love and Friendship by Emily Bronte

Love is like the wild rose-briar,
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Line Endings

Meg's Note: Years ago in an NCTE session, Jori Krulder passed out a handout in which she had typed a poem WITHOUT the line breaks the poet had originally included—and then had us try to figure out where the lines could/should be broken, and what effects those different configurations had. I've done that activity with my students ever since. This poem is a great candidate for that!

Elegy for a Woman of No Importance
(or “or Images from a Baghdadi Alley”)
by Nazik al-Malaika

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no doors heard her death tale told and retold,
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Only a beggar in the street, consumed
by hunger, heard the echo of her life—
the safe forgetfulness of tombs,
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The night gave way to morning thoughtlessly,
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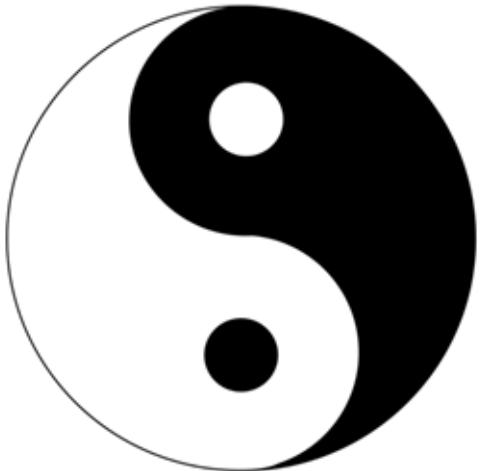
3. Tension / Complexity

- a. Ideas / Values in Conflict
- b. Find “Meaning” here



“...the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.”

— F. Scott Fitzgerald



Look for Contrasts, Tensions, and Complexities

Created by Shifts, Conflicts, and Juxtaposition

Contrasts, Tensions, and Complexities often fall between **Romantic** and **Realistic** perspectives

Individual	vs	Society
Romantic	vs	Realist
Idealistic	vs	Realistic
Emotional	vs	Rational
Rural/Pastoral	vs	Urban/Metro
Natural	vs	Industrial
Natural	vs	Artificial
Rash	vs	Logical
Creative	vs	Pragmatic
Progressive	vs	Conservative
Religious	vs	Scientific
Innocent	vs	Experienced
Naive	vs	Worldly

Shifts / Contrasts

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What might—or do you already—use from these tips?

Qs from U





Introduction to Poetry

By [Billy Collins](#)

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

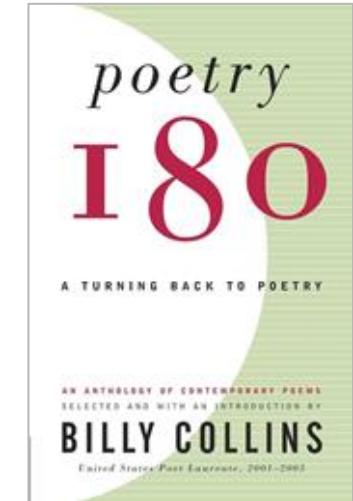
5 I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
10 across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

15 They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.



We are risk takers
and mistake makers

(thanks Andy)

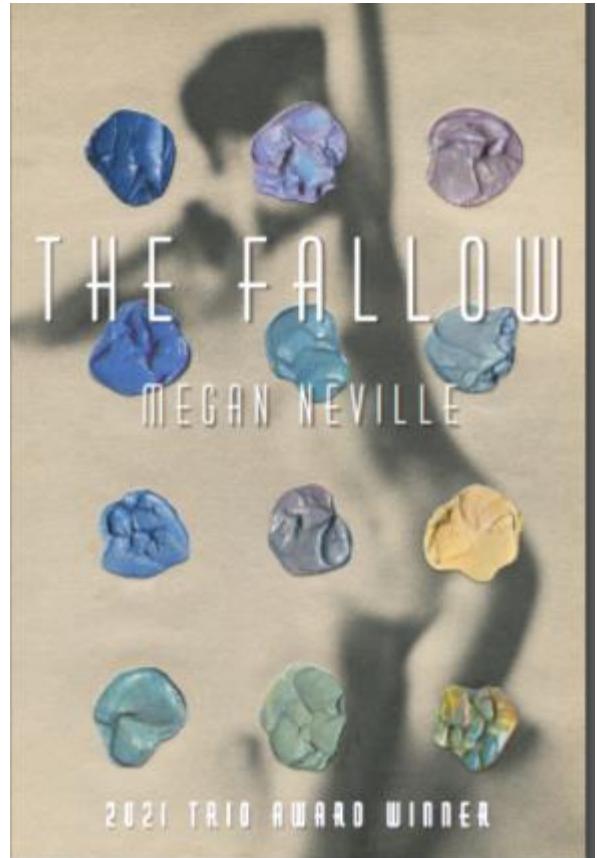
Some of Megan's work can be read at
megannevillepoetry.wordpress.com

Purchase her latest book of poems:

at bookshop.org

at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)

at [Trio House Press](https://triohousepress.com) (a Minneapolis-based publisher <3)



Next Step Blog

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Helping Students Earn the Sophistication Point in AP English

 Dr. Brandon Abdon

AP® English AP® Literature AP® Language



Every May, AP readers hear the same refrain: "The sophistication point is a unicorn." But that's not quite right. Unicorns don't exist. The sophistication point does. It's elusive, yes—but it shows up often enough to remind us that it's real and achievable. Students can and do earn it. The challenge for teachers is helping students move past formulas and into writing that demonstrates genuine nuance, control, and depth. **It's also important to remember that the sophistication point is not required to earn the highest possible score on the exam.** Many students earn a "5" on their exams without any of the three essays earning it—but when students can demonstrate sophistication in the high-pressure setting of a timed exam, they deserve this as a sort of reward.

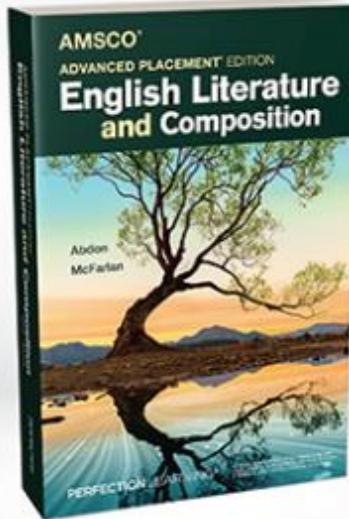
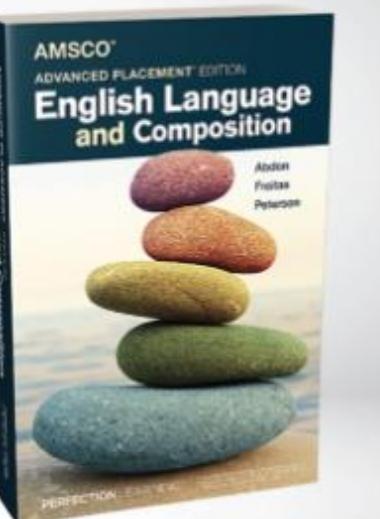
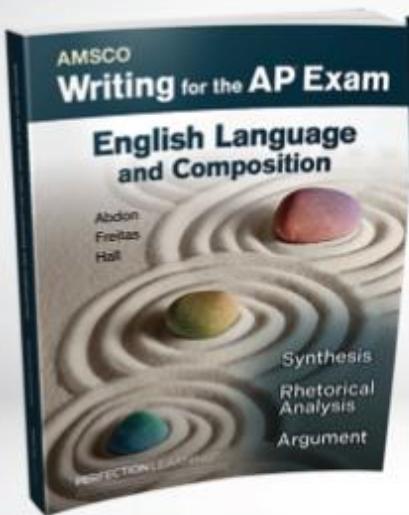


What Sophistication Really Means

Sophistication isn't about big words, long sentences, or forced ornamentation. Students don't earn it just by using "therefore" and "moreover" or by padding essays with unnecessary commentary. They have to do things strategically and thoughtfully.

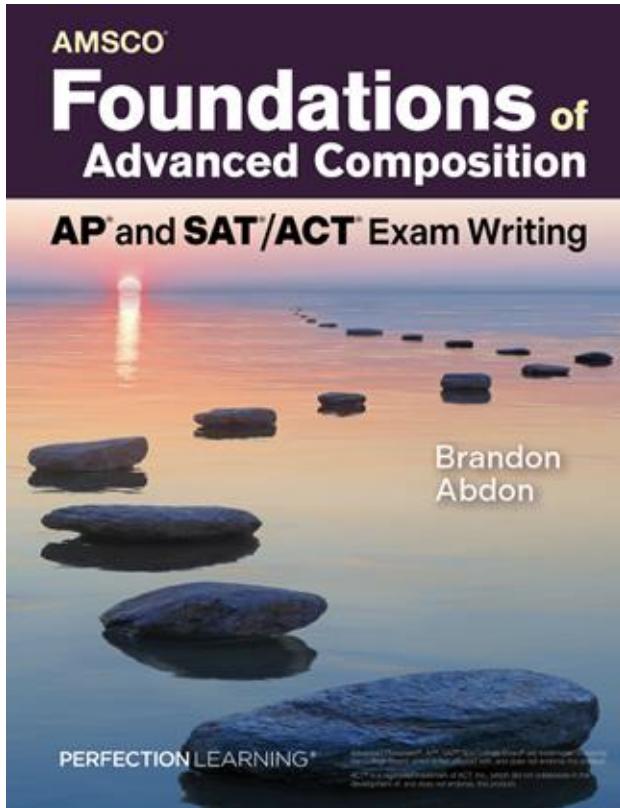
Instead, sophistication reveals itself when students:

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Composition

AP English
Literature and
Composition



- 30+ Lessons and Activities
- Honors Courses, Pre-AP®, Seminar, etc.
- Students work with their own writing AND with provided drafts and samples
- Supplemental video links for each lesson
- AP®, SAT®, and ACT® Ready, including...
 - Lessons with question types for each
 - Each lesson aligned to standards or expectations for each





June 1-4	Santa Ana, CA - Pre-AP and Workshopping	General AP - In-
Person		
June 8-11	Novi, MI - Novi HS APSI	
Literature - Online		
June 12-18	Cincinnati - The Reading	AP
Literature		
June 22-26	Bowling Green, KY - Western Kentucky Univ.	Literature - In-Person
June 29-July 3	Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON - AP Canada	Lang & Lit - In-
Person		
July 6-10	Garden of English	
6-12 ELA - Online		
July 16-17	Honolulu, HI - Hawaii DoE	Pre-
AP - In Person		
July 20-23	Honolulu, HI - Hawaii DoE	
Language - In-Person		
July 26-30	Mass Insight	

Brandons 2026 Summer Workshops

PERFECTION LEARNING

Please do the survey

&

Please be in touch

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ms.neville@gmail.com

Thank you!

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